STEPPING INTO AWARENESS: TEACHER REFLECTION ON CULTURAL
IDENTITY WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband and parents. Without the love, support, patience, and encouragement of Mitchell Turner this journey would not have been possible. From the very beginning, Carrie and John Bibelhauser encouraged my love of learning, and they showed me the value of hard work and perseverance. Thank you all for making me who I am and giving me the confidence to see this through.
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Being a teacher has fundamentally changed who I am and how I walk in this world. I am more inquisitive, more patient, and more loving because of you. You are my inspiration on this life-long journey of learning.
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ABSTRACT

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STEPPING INTO AWARENESS: TEACHER REFLECTION ON CULTURAL IDENTITY WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
Under the direction of VICKI LUTHER, Ed.D

As the diversity of students in U.S. public schools has increased, a cultural and linguistic divide has formed that separates many teachers from their students. Teachers feel they lack the knowledge and skills needed to meet the challenges of educating students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers need opportunities to think about their cultural identities and reflect critically on their beliefs, values, and assumptions so they may become more aware of how their own perspectives shape their teaching practice.

This qualitative case study explored how teachers can use a community of practice (CoP) to examine their own cultural identities and engage in critical reflection about their work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. A group of 10 teachers at one diverse middle school worked collaboratively to discuss culture, interrogate assumptions, write reflective journals, and exchange text messages to better understand the role of cultural identity in their teaching practices. Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory and Gay’s (2010) culturally responsive teaching provide theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the inquiry.

Findings suggested that critical reflection within a community of practice occurs as a process that begins with establishing initial conditions conducive to engagement and
leads to an increased awareness of cultural diversity that can result in teachers making a spectrum of personal and professional transformations. The study showed participating in a CoP helps teachers better understand cultural identity’s influence on teaching, collaborative learning allows teachers to gain insight from others’ perspectives, and critical reflection on cultural identity and its relationship to teaching can be a beneficial experience that results in developing identities as more culturally responsive teachers. Additional research is necessary to investigate how CoPs can be used in different contexts to explore the influence of cultural identity on teaching practice.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

With student populations around the world becoming more diverse, it is increasingly important for all teachers to be prepared to work with diverse learners (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2008; Pettit, 2011). Working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students requires that teachers have different skills, dispositions, and pedagogical practices than those needed when working with students with similar backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Unfortunately, researchers have found that many teachers and school systems find themselves unprepared to meet the needs of diverse learners (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Reeves, 2006; Wainer, 2006). This is of concern in the United States where teachers are predominantly White, middle-class women (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017; Taie & Goldring, 2017b), and student populations are becoming more diverse.

Background of the Problem

Much like the rest of the world, the United States has undergone demographic changes resulting in increased student diversity in public schools (de Brey et al., 2019; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Gay & Howard, 2000; Mellom et al., 2018; Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011). In the United States from 2000 to 2017, the percentage of White children ages 5-17 decreased from 62% to 51%, and the percentage of Black
children decreased from 15 percent to 14 percent. At the same time, the percentage of school-aged Hispanic children increased from 16% to 25%, Asian children increased from 3% to 5%, and children from two or more races increased from 2 percent to 4 percent (de Brey et al., 2019).

These changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of the country’s population are mirrored in public school enrollment. From 2000 to 2015 in public elementary and secondary schools, the percentage of White students declined by 12 points, and Black students declined by 2 points. The percentage of Hispanic students rose by 10 points, and Asian/Pacific Islander students rose 1 point (de Brey et al., 2019). School leaders and teachers need to consider these demographic changes as they make plans to serve dynamic and diverse student populations.

Enright (2011) described the increasing diversity in 21st-century classrooms as the “New Mainstream” (p. 80) because previously held notions about what is linguistically and culturally normal in the United States are outdated. Homogeneous classes of White, middle-class, monolingual English students are no longer the norm. Increasingly, students in 21st-century classrooms come from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, have a wide range of literacy practices, and participate in multiple and dynamic social communities. These New Mainstream students possess complex linguistic repertoires and hybridized identities that can be leveraged into academic success only if teachers are well-prepared and willing to adapt their pedagogy to meet students’ linguistic and cultural needs (Enright, 2011).
Achievement Gaps and Special Needs for CLD Students

Recent U.S. achievement data highlight significant achievement gaps among students of different races and ethnicities and show that schools are not meeting the needs of CLD learners. Data from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that Asian/Pacific Islander students consistently scored slightly higher than White students in reading and math in grades 4, 8, and 12 (McFarland et al., 2019). Students in all other ethnic and racial groups scored substantially lower than did White students. For example, in 8th grade mathematics, the White-Black scale score gap was 33 points, the White-Hispanic gap was 24 points, and the White-American Indian gap was 26 points. Results were similar for 8th grade reading: Black students scored 26 points lower than Whites, and Hispanic students scored 20 points lower.

Language and literacy skills also factor into academic achievement. Students identified as ELs (English learner) sometimes struggle to develop the reading proficiency they need to succeed in school. On the 2017 NAEP reading test, for example, the gap between students who are proficient in English and students who are learning English was 37 points in 4th grade and 43 points in 8th grade (McFarland et al., 2019).

Furthermore, although graduation rates have been on the rise overall, lower graduation rates for students in these racial and ethnic groups reflect the disparity in achievement levels. The adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high school students in the 2016-17 school year was 91% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 89% for Whites, 80% for Hispanics, and 78% for Blacks (McFarland et al., 2019). These statistics show that
race, ethnicity, and linguistic background significantly impact educational outcomes for students in this country.

Students from CLD backgrounds often require special services in school. During the 2015-16 school year, an estimated 49.3 million students attended 90,400 public schools in the United States, and 76% of those schools offered specialized instruction for English learners (ELs) (Taie & Goldring, 2017a). According to NCES (2018b), 10.1% of students in United States public schools were identified as ELs in the fall of 2016. That means that more than 4.9 million students enrolled in U.S. public schools that year spoke a language other than English at home and showed limited English proficiency.

All 50 states serve linguistically diverse students, and in 2016, nine states had EL populations that comprised 10% or more of the total student population. California had the highest at 20.2%, and West Virginia had the lowest at 0.9% (NCES, 2018a). In the state of Georgia, the site of this study, there has been a rapid increase in the number of ELs from 54,444 in 2000 to 114,427 in 2016 (NCES, 2018a). Educators in Georgia and across the country face the challenge of creating welcoming and effective learning environments for their increasingly diverse students.

Cultural Disconnect Between Students and Teachers

While diversity among students has been increasing, the racial and ethnic background of teachers has remained overwhelmingly homogeneous. During the 2015-16 school year, 80% of all public school teachers in the United States were White, 9% were Hispanic, 7% were Black, 2% were Asian, 1.4% were of two or more races, and the remaining were Pacific Islanders or Native American (NCES, 2017; Taie & Goldring,
2017b). These data indicate a racial and ethnic mismatch between students and teachers. In some situations when people from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or socioeconomic backgrounds interact, misunderstandings of one another’s behaviors may occur (Gay & Howard, 2000). White et al. (2005) referred to such misunderstandings as a cultural disconnect (White et al., 2005).

School settings are frequently the site of cultural disconnect because the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers are often different than those of their students (White et al., 2005). This mismatch can create issues that negatively impact education for diverse students because teachers’ cultural identities, understandings of language, and epistemological perspectives influence their pedagogical practice and their ability to develop empowering relationships with students (Cummins, 2000; Howard, 2016; White et al., 2005). Cummins (2000) noted, “Interactions between educators and culturally diverse students are never neutral with respect to societal power relations. In varying degrees, they either reinforce or challenge coercive relations of power in the wider society” (p. 48). This means that all teachers—especially White, middle-class, English-speaking monolingual teachers—need to be more conscious of how their interactions with culturally, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse students inside classrooms communicate and reinforce hegemonic notions of power that exist outside the classroom in society at large.

Teachers Feel Unprepared to Work With Diverse Students

Many teachers believe they are responsible for teaching grade-level content only, and English as a second language teachers are responsible for ensuring ELs develop the
linguistic skills they need to succeed academically (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Molle, 2013; Pettit, 2011; Stephens & Johnson, 2015). However, it is now the norm for ELs to spend most of their school days in mainstream classrooms with monolingual English-speaking teachers who have little training or experience on meeting their unique learning needs (Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Milner, 2011; Song, 2016; Yoon, 2008). Structural barriers, ingrained prejudices, and unimaginative curriculum impede progress for diverse students and hinder teachers’ abilities to make learning meaningful for these students (Nieto, 2013). In effect, CLD students experience increased marginalization when placed in classrooms where teachers are unprepared to meet their cultural and linguistic needs (Harper & de Jong, 2009).

In recent years, multicultural education has become a required part of teacher preparation programs (Gay & Howard, 2000; McNeal, 2005). Research shows that learning about diversity as a preservice teacher can provide teachers with the foundational awareness of cultural and linguistic differences they need to work in diverse schools (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Allard & Santoro, 2006; Gay & Howard, 2000; McNeal, 2005; Seidl & Conley, 2009; Xu, 2012). However, more than 60% of teachers employed during the 2015-16 school year had been teaching for more than 10 years (Taie & Goldring, 2017b). This indicates that many veteran teachers may be far removed from the training they need to serve CLD students effectively.

Lack of Professional Development to Prepare Teachers for Diversity

With the inclusion of greater numbers of ELs in mainstream classrooms, school leaders are becoming more aware of the need to provide all teachers with specialized
knowledge to help them work effectively with linguistically diverse student populations (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). In a synthesis of research on diversity in education, Banks et al. (2001) argued that in multicultural societies teachers need to develop competency in intergroup relations and develop values that promote equity and justice for all people. It is clear that a great number of teachers work with students who are culturally or linguistically unlike themselves. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers have opportunities to develop the skills they need to bridge the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic divide that separates them from their students.

The lack of professional development aimed at helping teachers develop practices to meet the needs of CLD students poses yet another problem. Even though 99% of all public school teachers reported participating in professional development activities in the 2011-12 school year, only 27% of teachers received any training on how to work with students who are learning English (Rotermund et al., 2017). Many classroom teachers are not prepared to handle the linguistic and cultural diversity that students bring to the classroom (Estrada, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Nieto, 2017).

The process of learning to teach CLD students should start in teacher preparation programs, but it must also continue throughout a teacher’s career (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Nieto, 2013; White et al., 2005). Although there is an abundance of research regarding teacher education programs preparing new teachers for diversity (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Cancienne, 2009; Santoro, 2009), there is a dearth of information about providing the same training for teachers already working in schools (Summer, 2014). This is especially important in areas that have historically had relatively homogeneous
populations but are now experiencing rapid demographic changes (Acquah et al., 2016; Mellom et al., 2018; Santoro, 2009). However, researchers have found that even in schools that have been serving CLD students for many years, teacher knowledge about diversity is low, and they desire more training (Acquah et al., 2016). A review of the literature suggests that for teachers to develop culturally and linguistically responsive practices, they need opportunities that allow them to develop cultural competence, reflect critically on their identities and teaching practices, and cultivate new understandings within a supportive community.

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, the teacher workforce is predominantly White, students are increasingly children of color, and race-based disparities impact educational outcomes for students at all levels. It is of the utmost importance that all teachers are prepared to teach all students especially “the non-white, non-middle-class, multilingual mainstream” (Cummins, 2000, p. 6). Teachers need better ways to understand how racial, cultural, and linguistic differences impact their teaching practice, and they need to develop pedagogically sound strategies for working with diverse students. According to Howard (2016), teachers “cannot fully and fruitfully engage in meaningful dialogue across the differences of race and culture without doing the work of personal transformation” (p. 9). This transformational work requires that teachers engage in critical self-reflection, build cultural competence, and develop teaching practices that are culturally responsive.

Many researchers have called for teachers to reflect critically on their own identities and the ways in which cultural differences impact their practice with diverse
students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Nieto, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2013). Teachers must first recognize themselves as cultural beings and acknowledge their positions of privilege before they can appreciate and effectively leverage the lived experiences of the children in their classrooms (Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013). Recognizing the power and agency teachers have in multicultural and multilingual classrooms, Menken and García (2010) suggested that it is necessary for teachers “to turn inward before [they] can act outwardly” (p. 263) to make their practices more culturally responsive to diverse learners. However, such purposeful reflection on identity and culture is missing from many teachers’ practice.

Gay and Howard (2000) recommended that all teacher education programs include components of multicultural education to prepare teachers to meet the needs of diverse student populations:

In order to teach these diverse students (and others) effectively, teachers need to know explicitly how their particular cultural values and beliefs are manifested in learning behaviors, what teaching techniques are most suitable for them, and how to adapt instructional strategies, relationships, and other classroom elements to better accommodate their “sociocultural frameworks and cognitive schemas.” The closer these match, the better students will perform on all aspects of school achievement. (p. 14)

Despite efforts to ensure that recent graduates are prepared to teach in multicultural settings, many teachers already working in classrooms report feeling unprepared to meet the needs of the CLD learners in their classrooms (Gomez &
Diarrassouba, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Reeves, 2006; Wainer, 2006). In addition, during the 2015-16 school year, the average public school teacher had 14 years of experience (Taie & Goldring, 2017b). These veteran teachers likely missed out on the multicultural education courses offered to those who have become teachers more recently, which indicates veteran teachers may need opportunities to reflect on their identities in order to serve CLD students effectively.

Although much of the knowledge needed to become an effective teacher is learned on the job, little time is allotted for in-service teachers to develop the deep self-knowledge and cultural self-awareness required to make their practices culturally responsive and supportive of diverse learners (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2016). In addition to developing self-knowledge and cultural awareness, teachers must also engage in critical dialogue with others to develop the capacity “to talk openly and deeply about cultural differences and racial inequities, acquire a heightened level of cultural sensitivity and critical consciousness, reevaluate cultural assumptions underlying behavior, and identify themes, ideas, and issues that have generative potential for pedagogical renewal” (Gay, 2010, p. 72). Researchers have found that small group activities and dialogue can result in high levels of cultural awareness and critical consciousness (Acquah & Commins, 2017). Additionally, when educators have adequate time and space to dialogue with others, those discussions can result in improved teaching practice that leads to increased student learning (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). This type of dialogue—which in the Freirian sense embodies love, humility, faith in humankind, trust, hope, and critical
thinking—can lead to a true education for both teachers and students, and it can help bring about a more just reality for all (Nieto, 2013).

Working within the context of a supportive social community to engage in self-reflection and consciousness raising can help teachers reach new understandings about culture and identity in their pedagogical practice (Brookfield, 2017; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2010). A community of practice (CoP) can provide teachers with opportunities to reflect critically and improve their teaching practice. Wenger et al. (2002) defined CoPs as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). Working in a CoP can provide a place for teachers to share knowledge, explore their professional and cultural identities, develop confidence, and engage in collective learning and problem solving (Wenger, 1998). If there is, as the data suggest, a cultural disconnect between students and teachers, then participating in a CoP in order to reflect critically on identity and pedagogy for CLD students may be one way to bridge the divide. For this reason, research is necessary to explore what happens when teachers engage in a CoP to reflect critically on their own cultural identity in relation to their work with CLD students.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theories of learning suggest learning is primarily a social process heavily influenced by culture, language, and environment (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1978; Wenger, 1998). Vygotsky (1934/1978) formulated a sociocultural theory of human development. He situated learning within social contexts
and acknowledged that not all children develop in the same ways or at the same rates. Vygotsky proposed that humans developed cognition by interacting with others. Cultural factors such as language, religion, values, beliefs, and behavioral norms influence these social interactions. These cultural factors, which vary from people to people, shape the ways in which humans come to know and understand the world in which they live. Consequently, it is possible to understand learning as both a social and cultural process.

Bandura (1977) also believed that humans learn in social environments by observing and imitating the behaviors of others. Social modeling provides children with opportunities to observe behaviors, evaluate the consequences of those behaviors, and determine whether they will perform such behaviors. Bandura’s social learning theory posits that cognitive development happens when someone pays attention to how another person performs a task and retains that information in memory. The individual can then choose whether to reproduce the behavior and use the model to improve his or her own performance through imitative practice. Individuals become motivated to produce behaviors that result in positive consequences and learn to avoid behaviors that result in negative consequences. According to Bandura (1977), social interactions influence learning, whereas behaviors are modeled, observed, and imitated.

In this study, I utilized Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning as a theoretical framework because it addresses the ways in which humans learn, make meaning, and construct identities through their social interactions. Wenger based his theory on his earlier work with Lave about the situated nature of learning within social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*,
Wenger (1998) delved deeper into the ways in which theories of identity and theories of practice shape learning in social contexts. Wenger believed that learning is essentially a social phenomenon. Humans gain knowledge from actively engaging in experiences they personally value, and they create meaning from what they learn through social interactions. Wenger used the term *communities of practice* to describe the groups in which people participate and learn. These groups are ubiquitous and often informal; they are a natural part of everyday life and include schools, workplaces, teams, religious organizations, collections of aficionados, and casual interest groups.

Members of a CoP interact with one another on a regular basis with the goal of becoming more knowledgeable about a topic and better at performing a task of common interest (Wenger, 1998). Every individual is simultaneously a member of multiple communities. People’s membership in different communities evolves and changes over time as they mature, find new interests, and explore new careers. By developing relationships with others in multiple and varied CoPs, individuals weave their social experiences into an understanding of themselves. Through their participation or nonparticipation in certain CoPs, people create a constantly changing, self-negotiated identity for themselves. Wenger (1998) noted a fundamental paradox in his social theory related to the “inseparable duality of the social and the individual” (p. 14). This is to say, people define themselves as individuals based on their social interactions with others.

Wenger (1998) explained, “Communities of practice . . . are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human” (p. 134). These groups can foster individual and collective
transformation, so they will be a useful mechanism for teachers engaged in collaborative critical reflection. CoPs can also produce tools and artifacts that become available as repertoires for use beyond the community (Wenger, 1998). Hence, the practices employed by participants in this study may benefit other teachers of diverse students. Wenger’s social learning theory provided a framework that allowed me to design a study based on the integration of theories of practice and theories of identity.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33) a study. For this study, I used the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework for structuring the study and analyzing data. Gay (2010) stated, “Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning” (p. 31). Teachers recognize, respect, and use the knowledge and skills students bring to the classroom to create learning experiences that are accessible, meaningful, and academically challenging for CLD students. Similar concepts are referred to by many different terms in educational literature—culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009), cultural competence (De Jesus, 2012), cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2003), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). I have included an explanation of these terms and my justification for using the term culturally responsive in Chapter 2.

Gay (2010) explained that culturally responsive teaching requires professional development opportunities for teachers that include “cultural knowledge and instructional
skills, in concert with personal self-reflection and self-monitoring techniques for teaching to and about ethnic diversity” (p. 250). Developing a culturally responsive teaching practice starts with critical reflection on the concept of culture, but also requires teachers to utilize what they learn to transform their practice. It is essential that teachers move beyond learning about diversity and put their new understandings to use in their classrooms. Nieto (2013) claimed that “moving from dispositions to actions” (p. 138) is the hallmark of teachers becoming culturally responsive. This suggests that when teachers have time to reflect on the role of culture in their practice and have opportunities to develop cultural competence, they can put this knowledge to use and serve diverse students better. As participants in this study explored their cultural identities within a CoP, they developed new beliefs about their teaching practice and dispositions that led to pedagogical actions; therefore, this conceptual framework solidly supports this research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore what happens when middle school teachers (grades 6, 7, and 8) engage in a CoP to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students. For this study, I used Brookfield’s (2017) definition of critical reflection: “the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of” (p. 3) the assumptions teachers use to guide their practice. Communities of practice referred to “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 5).
In this study, the CoP was a small group of teachers who agreed to participate in critical reflection on their identities and explore their beliefs about the ways that reflection affects their work with CLD students. I was both a researcher and a member of the CoP in this study. The group met face to face to explore our cultural identities and personal biases, have collaborative discussions, and critically reflect on our practices. Participants wrote reflective journals throughout the study and used text messages to capture their thinking about interactions with diversity in the classroom and in their lives. At the end of the study, I also conducted individual interviews with participants to find out how they believed participation in the CoP may affect their teaching practice with CLD students. Examining the ways in which teachers come to understand their identity in relation to their work with diverse students provided insight into the assumptions about diversity that shape pedagogical practice in 21st-century classrooms.

Research Questions

In this study I explored ways that teachers can use CoPs to reflect on identity. The primary research question that guided this research was:

1. What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities?

The following supporting questions helped define the focus of the study and allowed me to explore teachers’ experiences in the CoP and their beliefs about how those experiences may affect their teaching practice.

2. How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with CLD students?
3. How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their practice with CLD students?

Assumptions

This qualitative study included several assumptions. First, the qualitative research paradigm operates on the assumption that there are multiple and subjective realities shaped by individuals’ lived experiences in specific contexts and through social interactions with others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative researcher focuses on the process by which people ascribe meaning to their experiences and tries to understand a specific phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I assumed that multiple perspectives on identity and teaching practice would arise and that the perspectives of all participants were valid. I also assumed that the participants in this study were engaging in the CoP in good faith and truthfully sharing information about their cultural backgrounds, identity, beliefs, and teaching practices. I used purposeful sampling strategies to ensure that participants were well-suited for the study. To ensure that participants understood the nature and scope of the study, I explained the purpose of the study, its anticipated length, and the expectations for individual contributions and commitments.

Limitations and Delimitations

I recognize that there are underlying delimitations and limitations in this study. Delimitations are characteristics a researcher chooses to limit the scope and define the boundaries of a study (Simon & Goes, 2011). The research questions for this study guided the selection of participants and focused the inquiry (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016). I chose to study how one small group of middle school teachers at one diverse school can work together to develop better understandings of their own identities, reflect on how their identities relate to their interactions with CLD students, and how teachers believe the experience may affect their practice. I chose this topic because many researchers have suggested this type of reflection is an integral part of developing a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2013), but there is a lack of information about how such work transpires with teachers currently working in school settings.

Several factors limited this study. First, I conducted this study in one school with a small number of teachers as participants. This restricted the amount of data I collected and resulted in a unique picture of the setting and the individuals in the study. Additionally, the short timeframe in which the study occurred resulted in a snapshot of the effects of teachers examining their identity and critically reflecting on their teaching practice with CLD students. A study conducted over a longer timeframe may have provided greater insight into the effects of working with a CoP to develop culturally responsive pedagogies.

Another limitation of the study was my participation as a member in the CoP. I recognize that my multiple roles as researcher, participant, and leader within the CoP may have influenced my interpretations of data and the experiences of other participants. As a teacher of CLD students, I am passionate about creating safe, equitable spaces for students to learn and grow. This passion is what lead to my choice of topic for this study. In order to guard against my own biases, beliefs, and assumptions influencing the results
of this study, I took steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. I utilized Guba’s (1981) four criteria for trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—to improve the validity and reliability of the research. To enhance credibility of this research project, I employed several techniques: using multiple sources of data; triangulating and member checking data; and creating an audit trail to document my subjectivities, data collection process, analysis, and decision making throughout the research project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Chapter 3 provides greater details about the limitations of this study and the impact of researcher bias.

Significance of the Study

By investigating how middle school teachers can critically reflect on their cultural identities and how that reflection relates to their practice, this study shed light on the intersections of teacher identity, culturally responsive practice, and equitable education in a diverse society. This research could benefit teachers, students, administrators, academic coaches, professional development facilitators, and school district leaders by providing insights into the ways that teachers can use critical reflection on identity to shape their teaching practice. Researchers and school leaders could use these new understandings to create professional learning opportunities that better prepare teachers for the challenges of working in diverse settings. Ultimately, such research could benefit CLD students because teachers may be better prepared to understand their needs and help them succeed academically.
Definitions of Key Terms

*Community of practice* refers to a group of individuals working together to develop knowledge and competence within a particular realm of activity in which they all find value. CoPs require members to engage actively with one another through social interactions in order to develop knowledge and make meaning from their collective experiences (Wenger, 1998).

*Critical reflection* refers to the process of systematically and intentionally examining and evaluating assumptions that an individual makes about the world (Brookfield, 2017). In this study, teachers critically reflected on their assumptions about cultural identity that shape their teaching practice.

*Culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD) is a term used to describe students from families and communities that speak languages other than standard American English or practice cultural or religious traditions different from dominant White, middle-class, English-speaking, Judeo-Christian practices. The U.S. Department of Education primarily uses this term to identify students in the process of developing English language proficiency, but in this study, the term served to recognize a broader range of social, cultural, racial, religious, and economic backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

*Culture* is highly contested term that can be understood in different ways (Bullivant, 1993; Erickson, 2012; Gorski, 2016; Lindsey et al., 2003; Warikoo, 2012). In this study, *culture* denoted the customs, practices, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews shared by a social group that may be based on aspects of human description such as ethnicity, race, religion, language, geography, ancestry, social class, gender,
sexual orientation, and age. To avoid essentializing and simplifying the concept of culture, I acknowledge that culture is a dynamic construct that changes for groups and individuals over time and from place to place. Everyone is multicultural in the sense that every individual develops a “distinctive personal cultural repertoire” (Erickson, 2012, p. 567) through their unique experiences participating in an array of overlapping cultural groups.

Diversity refers to an expanded notion of difference among people. In addition to racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, diversity may also refer to differences in peoples’ socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, family structure, and cultural backgrounds (Nieto, 2013).

English language learner (ELL), English learner (EL), and limited English proficiency (LEP) are highly debated terminology used to describe students in the process of learning English but whose first language is not English. U.S. governmental agencies use these terms in various documents and contexts. McFarland et al. (2019) of the National Center for Education Statistics defined an English language learner as:

An individual who, due to any of the reasons listed below, has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to be denied the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society. Such an individual (1) was not born in the United States or has a native language other than English; (2) comes from environments where a language other than English is dominant; or (3) is an American Indian or Alaska Native and comes from environments where a
language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency. (p. 346)

Many states have adopted the shorter and less redundant English learner, and the federal government has recently started following this lead. In most scenarios, the term limited English proficiency has been abandoned because many people view its focus on student deficits as derogatory (Fleischer, 2017; Pettit, 2011). García (2009) advocated for using the term emergent bilingual to emphasize the positive effects of knowing more than one language and reframing students’ linguistic capabilities in more positive light; however, that term fails to recognize students who know more than two languages, and it has not been widely adopted. For the purposes of this study, I use English learner (EL) to describe students formally classified by local, state, and federal agencies as eligible to receive English language development services in school.

Identity, in this study, describes the multifaceted self-concept that people develop to understand who they are in relation to others (Clarke, 2009; Gee, 2000; Illeris, 2014; Wenger, 1998). This view of identity is grounded in social science, rather than psychology. From a sociocultural perspective, the concept of identity is simultaneously individual and communal. Constructing an identity requires an individual to assign meaning to his or her unique lived experiences within an array of overlapping social communities (Wenger, 1998). Identity is dynamic and evolving because it is negotiated over time and in multiple contexts. Identity development is an ongoing process influenced by historical, political, and philosophical forces. Identity is both a process and
a reified product of the process of coming to understand oneself in the world (Olsen, 2012; Wenger, 1998).

In-service teacher describes an individual who is currently employed as a teacher.

Linguistically diverse refers to students classified as academically proficient in English but also speak one or more other languages.

Middle school indicates a school comprised of grades 6, 7, and 8.

Novice teacher refers to a teacher with less than three full years of classroom experience (Melnick & Meister, 2008).

Preservice teacher refers to an individual enrolled in a teacher education program.

Veteran teacher refers to a teacher with three or more years of teaching experience (Melnick & Meister, 2008).

Summary

Rising diversity in U.S. public schools has created a cultural and linguistic divide that separates many teachers and students (Cummins, 2000; Howard, 2016; White et al., 2005). Teachers often report feeling unprepared for the challenges of working with students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Estrada, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Nieto, 2017). Many researchers have suggested that teachers need opportunities to reflect critically on their cultural identities and the ways in which their beliefs, values, and perspectives shape their teaching practice (Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2013). The aim of this study was to explore what happens when middle school teachers (grades 6, 7, and 8)
work within a CoP to examine their own cultural identities and engage in critical reflection about their work with CLD students.

This research project is grounded in social learning theory and the concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy. Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning provides a unified framework for exploring how people use social interactions to make meaning from their experiences, learn about themselves and others, construct identities, and improve their practices. When teachers are culturally responsive, they adapt their practice to utilize students’ prior experiences and existing knowledge to leverage new learning (Gay, 2010). In conjunction, social learning theory and culturally responsive pedagogy support the goals of this study.

In this chapter, I also addressed the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. I explained the importance of doing this research and described who might benefit from it. The chapter ended with a clarification of key terms.

Chapter 2 provides an explanation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks supporting this research and a review of the literature about the issues of identity, culture, diversity, critical reflection, and CoPs as they relate to culturally responsive teaching practices and teaching CLD students. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the results, as well as implications and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As the diversity of students in U.S. public schools has increased, a cultural and linguistic gap has formed between many teachers and their students (Cummins, 2000; Howard, 2016; White et al., 2005). Teachers frequently lack the skills and knowledge they need to bridge the divide (Estrada, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Nieto, 2017). To develop the cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogies they need to work effectively with diverse students, teachers need opportunities to reflect critically on their identities and the values and assumptions that shape their world views and teaching practices (DeJesus, 2012; Gay 2010; Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2013). The purpose of this research was to study what happens when middle school teachers engage in a community of practice (CoP) to examine their own cultural identities in relation to the work they do with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students.

Chapter 1 provided a detailed explanation of the background of this problem and presented a rationale for conducting this research. This chapter provides information about the procedures used to conduct a literature review on the topic, explanations of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks supporting this study, and a review of research related to the topic under investigation.
Review of the Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study was:

1. What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities?

The following supporting questions also guided the inquiry:

2. How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with CLD students?

3. How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their practice with CLD students?

Conducting the Literature Review

To develop an understanding of issues related to this study, I read numerous books and more than 100 articles related to diversity, teacher identity, critical reflection, and culturally responsive pedagogy. To locate relevant articles for this literature review, I used multiple electronic databases. Databases included Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Journal Storage (JSTOR), ProQuest, Education Full Text (EBSCO), and Academic Search Complete (EBSCO). To locate pertinent literature, I used key words and search terms I identified, as well as those found in other related studies, including but not limited to: communities of practice, critical reflection, cultural awareness, cultural competence, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, diversity in education, English language learners, reflective practice, teacher identity, and teaching for diversity.
When conducting searches, I reviewed results by reading titles and abstracts to determine whether individual articles were relevant to my research. After identifying articles that were potentially useful as references for this study, I read, annotated, and recorded notes about each article. I scrutinized articles with salient connections to key aspects of this research for potential inclusion in this literature review. In many cases, I used the reference lists of particularly germane articles to lead to additional literature that I reviewed for this study. This iterative process enabled me to conduct a thorough examination of research and writing related to this inquiry.

To ensure I was using quality resources, I established criteria for selecting resources and documenting the sources included in this literature review. To determine whether articles and other sources were appropriate for inclusion in this literature review, I used the following criteria:

- sources were written in English, my primary language;
- sources contained information pertinent to the study;
- texts were primary sources or credible and heavily referenced secondary sources;
- books were seminal works or written by recognized experts in their field;
- articles were published within the past 30 years;
- articles were available as full texts; and
- articles were published in peer-reviewed journals.

Whenever possible, I used published peer-reviewed research articles and primary documents. I consulted books written by recognized experts in the fields of culturally
responsive pedagogy, diversity, critical reflection, identity, CoPs, second language acquisition, and multicultural education. I also accessed association reports, government documents, and institutional websites to locate information to support this inquiry. As the issue of increasing diversity in schools is a global phenomenon, I consulted studies completed in the United States and in other countries, including several from Finland and Australia. I carefully cited all sources and provided attribution for information obtained from published works.

To organize the large number of resources used in this study, I used Zotero reference management software. I created charts in Microsoft Word to sort and analyze the notes I recorded about books, articles, and documents used in this study. Using these procedures, I was able to conduct a systematic review of literature to support this inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural paradigms of learning can take many forms. Dewey (1938/2015) believed the goal of formal education was to create productive members of a democratic society; he believed that a good education would benefit both the individual and society. Dewey argued that all human learning is experiential. Through interactions with other humans, individuals generate a unique and socially constructed set of experiences. These accumulated experiences influence all aspects of future learning. For example, people's experiences in the present are filtered through what they have learned by experience in the past, and all prior experiences affect how future learning experiences are perceived in positive or negative ways. From Dewey’s perspective, the social context in which children learn greatly influences what and how they learn.
Vygotsky (1934/1978) formulated a sociocultural theory of human development in which he claimed that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognition because humans make meaning by interacting with others. Vygotsky believed that children come to understand the world around them by interacting with their families, communities, and objects in their environment. These social interactions occur within cultural contexts; therefore, human cognition is dependent upon social and cultural forces. *Cognition* refers to the internal mental processes that humans use to think, remember, learn, and understand (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.a).

Bandura (1977) proposed a behavioristic theory of social learning that claimed humans learn by observing models in their environment, using cognitive processes to mediate those stimuli, and demonstrating learning as imitative behavioral output. However, acknowledging that his theory could not fully capture the complexities of thinking and feeling behaviors, Bandura (1986) renamed his theory social cognitive theory to capture more accurately the influence of social interactions on cognitive development (McLeod, 2016).

Building on the work of Dewey, Vygotsky, Bandura, and other social learning theorists, Lave and Wenger (1991) created the term *situated learning* to describe how learning takes place through active participation with others in authentic and meaningful daily experiences. In contrast to traditional abstract decontextualized learning, situated learning happens in informal contextualized settings and relies on social interactions. Learners use prior knowledge, critical thinking, and kinesthetic engagement to construct new understandings of their lived experiences in collaboration with others.
Using the concept of situated learning as a foundation, Wenger (1998) developed a theory that defines learning as the active participation in social communities. Working within what Wenger calls *communities of practice*, people create meaning from their shared experiences and construct identities for themselves in relation to their participation in communal groups. Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory integrates theories of learning, practice, and identity; therefore, it is an appropriate framework to support a study investigating how teachers can work together to explore their identities and reflect on their practice with diverse students. *Figure 1* shows how Wenger conceptualized social learning theory at the intersection of theories about social structures, identity, situated experience, practice, power, subjectivity, meaning, and collectivity.

*Figure 1*. Diagram of social learning theory positioned at the intersection of other intellectual traditions. Reprinted with permission from *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, by E. Wenger, 1998, p. 14. Copyright 1998 by Cambridge University Press.
Wenger (1998) based his theory on four basic premises:

- Humans are social beings;
- Knowledge is derived from competence in valued enterprises;
- Knowing comes from active engagement in the world;
- Meaning is the end product of learning. (p. 4)

From this perspective, learning can be understood as “a fundamentally social phenomenon” (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). According to this theory, learning is social participation in which humans, as active participants in the practices of an array of social communities, create meaning from lived experiences, develop knowledge, and construct identities in relation to those communities. These CoPs “are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 5). Sometimes these communities are self-selected and sought out by individuals, such as community theater groups, recreational tennis teams, or knitting clubs. Others are subject to the influence of cultural or geographical factors, such as national identity, religious affiliation, or neighborhood. In many cases, membership in one community overlaps with other communities. For example, a middle school physical science teacher is, by her job description, a member of the science department that includes earth science and life science teachers who meet regularly and strive to improve their teaching practices. At the same time, she is also a member of the school faculty, an employee of a school district, and may also be a member of a teacher’s union, a contributor to an online teaching blog, or a member of an international professional organization. The boundaries
between each of these communities are fluid and complementary. Memberships and levels of participation in various CoPs change organically. Wenger (1998) used the term “constellation of practice” (p. 126) to describe the way in which all people are simultaneously members of multiple CoPs.

CoPs are a natural part of daily life and often go unnoticed (Wenger, 1998). People develop practices in their jobs, at school, in places of worship, around hobbies, talents, and interests of all kinds. Membership is rarely formalized and evolves over time. Learning within a CoP is an ongoing and dynamic process. This type of learning alters how people engage in practice, it changes how people understand their practice, and it creates new resources for use in practice. In this way, participation is a form of transformation. These features of social learning theory make it appropriate for a study investigating what happens when teachers engage in critical reflection on cultural identity and personal bias in relation to their teaching practice. Social learning theory also provides explicit descriptions of membership, participation, and belonging to a CoP.

Membership in a Community of Practice

Wenger (1998) posited that membership in a CoP was substantively different than being a member of a team, network, or social community. Membership in a CoP does not rely exclusively on declared allegiance, established social connections, or geographical proximity. Wenger described three dimensions by which practice constitutes a community—mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. More recently, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) explained how a CoP differs from other groups by describing three characteristics that define CoPs—domain,
community, and practice. A CoP exists around “a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). The community exists because “members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Through sustained interactions over time, members as practitioners “develop a shared repertoire of resources” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). In other words, members of a CoP must actively work together in pursuit of improving their performance and develop a collection of tools and routines for engaging in the work.

Participation in a Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) created the framework of legitimate peripheral participation to help explain the different forms and levels of participation by members of a CoP. Lave and Wenger (1991) described learning as a process of social negotiation of meaning among members with varying levels of expertise and active engagement in the community:

“Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a CoP. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full
participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (p. 29)

Some members of a CoP may be perceived as participating at the periphery of that community because they have different levels of knowledge, skills, or experience in a particular area than others who might be seen as engaged in full participation. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) insisted that there is no distinct periphery nor is there a central core of participation. They considered all participation as legitimate because learning within social contexts is fluid and dynamic. “Changing locations and perspectives are part of actors’ learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). In other words, movement within a CoP is a natural and constituent part of the learning process.

Such an understanding of learning within social systems is directly related to identity development. As Lave and Wenger (1991) explained, “Learning . . . implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). In the process of becoming a member of a CoP a person is “transformed into a practitioner . . . whose changing knowledge, skill, and discourse are part of a developing identity” (p. 122).

Modes of Belonging to a Community of Practice

Wenger (1998) described three *modes of belonging*—engagement, imagination, and alignment—to a CoP. These modes describe different ways that members of a CoP broker their identities as members of the community, make sense of their learning within
the group, and situate their new understandings within large contexts. Wenger (1998) defined the three modes of belonging as:

1. **Engagement**—active involvement in mutual processes of negotiating meaning
2. **Imagination**—creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience
3. **Alignment**—coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises. (pp. 173-174)

These three modes of belongings are evidenced in different proportions in different CoPs and can ebb and flow over time as a CoP evolves.

**Engagement.** To engage in a CoP is to join in collaborative enterprise with other members (Wenger, 1998). It requires interactions with others through “community-building conversations, . . . mutual engagement in shared activities, . . . development of interpersonal relationships, . . . negotiation of meaning, . . . and the development of a shared practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 184). In other words, engagement in a CoP means actively working with a group of individuals who share a common interest and a desire to improve practice in a particular area.

**Imagination.** In terms of CoPs, *imagination* refers to a creative capacity to envision new ideas and ways of being that extend beyond current reality and one’s own experience (Wenger, 1998). Imagination in this sense is different from the mode of engagement because it transcends the immediate conditions of a “shared reality” (Wenger, 1998, p. 177) created when members of a CoP actively engage with one another. However, imagination as a mode of belonging is not an individual experience.
Wenger (1998) explained, “The creative character of imagination is anchored in social interactions and communal experiences” (p. 178). When exercised in social settings, imagination allows participants in a CoP to expand their view of what is possible and reimagine who they are in the world.

Alignment. Alignment means that members take what they have learned and who they have become and reach out into other areas of their lives to further extend the work they have accomplished inside the local CoP (Wenger, 1998). It is the range of this mode that differs from the others: “What alignment brings into the picture is a scope of action writ large, of coordinated enterprises on a large scale, not inherent in engagement or in imagination” (Wenger, 1998, p. 179). When participants in a CoP seek alignment, they find other means and other venues in which to utilize or extend what they have learned in a CoP to other contexts.

In later work, Wenger (2010) described these three modes as “modes of identification [emphasis added] that position learning in the landscape” (p. 4). That is to say, these three modes operate within the CoP and extend beyond its boundaries to other aspects of participants’ lives. In this way, members of a CoP are able to identify ways in which their active involvement in a CoP allows them to imagine new possibilities for themselves and to coordinate their efforts in broader contexts and larger systems beyond the CoP. From this perspective, participation can be seen as an act of identity because the learning that happens within a CoP “can become a source of meaningfulness and of personal and social energy” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). In the process of collaboratively
making new meaning within a CoP, participants are also creating new identities for themselves and renewing their enthusiasm for learning in practice.

Therefore, Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory is a fitting theoretical framework for this research of how a group of middle school teachers participating in a CoP can reflect on their identities in relation to their work with CLD students and how they believe those experiences may affect their teaching practice. Wenger (1998) noted, “Issues of identity are an integral aspect of social learning theory and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community, and meaning” (p. 145). In other words, by developing relationships with others through social practice, a person can weave his experiences into an understanding of himself. This process gives rise to an identity that exists not as a static, reified object but as a constantly negotiated self-concept. Such a dynamic sense of self can help teachers navigate the rapidly changing educational landscape they face in schools today.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides a rationale for positioning a study within existing ideas about a topic or phenomenon (Bazeley, 2013). A conceptual framework can include prior research and recognized theoretical constructs as well as the ideological perspectives of the current researcher (Maxwell, 2005). Many researchers have shown that culturally responsive practices can improve learning for CLD students and help teachers develop more effective pedagogies (Higgins, & Ponte, 2017; Mellom et al., 2018; Milner, 2011; Santoro, 2009; Wyatt, 2014; Yoon, 2008). Using the principles of
culturally responsive pedagogy as a conceptual framework for this study is appropriate because research supports this approach.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The idea that teachers should empower students by grounding their practices in the lived experiences and cultural ways of knowing that students bring to the classroom derives from the works of Geneva Gay (2010) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009). Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching “as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Along the same lines, Ladson-Billings (2009) explained culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Lucas and Villegas (2013) argued that students’ linguistic backgrounds are equally as important when crafting pedagogical approaches. Hence, a culturally and linguistically responsive teacher is one who respects and understand students’ cultural values, lived experiences, and language and utilizes those as assets upon which to build new knowledge (Acquah et al., 2016; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016).

Milner (2011) cautioned that it is difficult to describe or prescribe exactly what culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is because it is dependent upon the students a teacher serves. As the composition of students varies from class to class and from year to year, so too change the strategies that teachers employ to meet the specific cultural and linguistic needs of those learners. Milner (2011) advised, “The practice of
culturally relevant pedagogy involves a state of being or mindset that permeates teachers’
decision-making and related practices” (p. 68). Therefore, it is more of a perspective on
education than a specific set of teaching practices (Gay, 2010). Having a teacher
equipped with effective strategies is important, but CLD students also need caring
teachers who are sensitive to the ways in which cultural differences can impact student
learning and sense of self (Gay, 2010; Yoon, 2008).

Similar Concepts and Differing Terminology

Several different terms appear in education literature to describe the ways in
which culture influences teacher practice and student learning. Ladson-Billings (2009)
described *culturally relevant teaching* as utilizing student culture (e.g., texts, music,
history, communication and interaction styles, and values) to make learning meaningful
and “transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p. 19). Ladson-Billings
(1995, 2009) initially focused on the attributes and practices of teachers who were
successfully educating African-American students. Her research revealed that culture,
race, and socioeconomic factors influenced teachers’ perceptions of themselves, their
students, students’ families, and the communities in which they taught. Teachers who
viewed teaching as an art, believed all students can learn, valued their students’ lived
experiences, integrated those experiences into classroom practices, and worked to
develop equitable student-teacher relationships and strong learning communities were
most effective in improving academic achievement for African-American students. The
use of these culturally relevant teaching practices also helped students develop positive
self-images and stronger social relationships.
The principles of culturally relevant pedagogy do not only apply to working with African-American students. Researchers have found that the approach facilitates learning for indigenous populations, immigrants, multilingual students, and other nondominant culture groups (Allard & Santoro, 2006; D’Warte, 2014; Higgins, & Ponte, 2017; Mellom et al., 2018; Milner, 2011; Santoro, 2009; Wyatt, 2014; Yoon, 2008). A culturally relevant approach to teaching helps students see the value in their own culture and perceive themselves as powerful agents in the world (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Recognizing the dynamic nature of culture, Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledged that the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy must also evolve to meet the everchanging needs of new generations of diverse students. To prevent culturally relevant teaching from becoming stagnant, distorted, and oversimplified, Ladson-Billings supported the move toward culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Paris (2012) suggested that culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies do not go far enough to “support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality” (p. 95) of students in today’s landscape of rapidly changing demographics and dynamic youth culture. Paris argued that in a pluralistic society, traditional ways of educating students for a monocultural and monolinguistic world are outdated and inequitable. Paris (2012) explained, “Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). In other words, teachers should simultaneously provide students access to dominant culture competencies and support them in strengthening their cultural and linguistic resources to encourage equitable participation.
for all cultural groups in our society. Hence, a culturally sustaining approach promotes social justice by embracing cultural pluralism.

These three asset pedagogies—culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining—focus on the importance of recognizing, respecting, and utilizing culture as an educational tool. Each one has a distinct focus, but they share many elements. For this study, the term *culturally responsive* is used because, as Nieto (2013) noted, it is widely used in the field of education, and it incorporates many of the concepts implied by similar terms such as *culturally relevant* and *culturally sustaining*. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret being responsive to culture as an implication that teachers will act in ways that honor and cultivate diversity as well as transform their practices to be more effective, equitable, and socially just.

Identity

*Identity* is a difficult word to define because over time it has meant different things in different contexts (Gee, 2000; Olsen, 2012). In the early to mid-20th century, identity was a concept used in psychoanalysis to describe the unique self-image a person held (Olsen, 2012). In the latter half of the century, social psychologists began focusing more on the ways in which cultural phenomena such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, and sexual orientation shape individual personal identities. More recently, social scientists have begun to see identity as the intersection of the individual and the social (Clarke, 2009; Illeris, 2014; Olsen, 2012; Wenger, 1998). Within sociocultural theory, identity is both a product of social experience and an individualized interpretation of those experiences (Olsen, 2012; Wenger, 1998).
Identity Within the Context of Wenger’s Social Learning Theory

Wenger (1998) claimed that identity formation was an essential part of social learning theory because identity was an integral component of making meaning through practice within a community. Building an identity requires an individual to make meaning from experiences gained through membership in social communities. The individual and the community are mutually constituted; they exist as an inseparable duality. The very concepts of individual and community are created through social negotiation of meaning. In other words, people understand what these words mean because they have been defined and reified through social processes (Wenger, 1998).

According to Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory, CoPs provide space for the social negotiation of identity. Wenger (1998) explained, “Our practices deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being. In this sense, the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities” (p. 149). People define who they are and create identities in practice by

- negotiating their experiences through participation in social communities.
- claiming membership or non-membership in certain communities.
- creating learning trajectories that incorporate the past and the future in the process of negotiating the present.
- building a nexus of memberships that reconciles various aspects of their existence.
- developing connections between their local experiences and broader global contexts. (Wenger, 1998, p. 149)
Identities develop through a complex process Wenger (1998) described as a “social ecology of identity” (p. 190). If ecology is understood to be the interrelationship of organisms and their environments (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.b), then the idea of a social ecology of identity can be used as a mechanism for understanding the interrelated nature of social environments and identity formation. Wenger explained that human identity exists as a tension between identification and negotiation. People develop modes of belonging through which they identify with certain CoPs; this identification provides the material used to form identities. People also control the meaning they make from their collaborative experiences; this process of negotiating meaning influences people’s investment in and ownership of their identifications. When the threads of identification and negotiation are woven together, they form “the social fabric of our identities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 208). Thus, identity is the weaving of various threads or aspects of who we are into an intricately designed and complex cloth. Other scholars have conceptualized identity in a variety of ways.

Layers of Identity

Illeris (2014) presented a simplified model of modern Western personal identity that puts core identity at the center, has a middle personality layer, and an outer preference layer. He described core identity as established in early childhood and as a fundamental understanding of one’s self as an individual with certain characteristics that remain relatively stable over time. A personality layer that encompasses the ways in which individuals relate to other people, society, and the world around them wraps this core identity. On the outside is the layer of preferences that embodies people’s
proclivities for acting and thinking in specific ways in routine circumstances. Illeris (2014) explained that in addition to a central identity made of the three aforementioned layers, each person also has part identities that encompass who they are within the context of work, family, religion, politics, national belonging, and everyday experience. He acknowledged that rapid advances in technology and communication have made the concept of identity more fluid and dynamic in modern times than it may have been earlier (Illeris, 2014).

Identity: Being Recognized as a Certain Kind of Person

Gee (2000) defined identity as “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (p. 99). Although this definition may sound simplistic, it becomes more complex when acknowledging that people are constantly moving in and among multiple contexts. For example, it is possible to recognize a person as a mother, twin, extrovert, high school principal, feminist, community activist, and tennis player simultaneously.

All individuals have multiple types of identities—some they choose for themselves and others are ascribed by other people.

Gee (2000) developed a way of describing identity from four perspectives. Table 1 shows the four strands of identity, the source of power from which each derives, and the process through which the power of each identity works.
Table 1

*Gee’s Four Ways to View Identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Source of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nature-identity</td>
<td>a state</td>
<td>developed from forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Institution-identity</td>
<td>a position</td>
<td>authorized by authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Discourse-identity</td>
<td>an individual trait</td>
<td>recognized in the discourse/dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Affinity-identity</td>
<td>experiences</td>
<td>shared in the practice of “affinity groups”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The *nature perspective*, or N-identity, is based on genetic or biological factors that impact identity. An N-identity derives from natural forces, not society. N-identities are recognized by self and others. For example, being an identical twin is an N-identity.

The *institutional perspective*, or I-identity, is recognition for holding a position within an institution. The authorities within an institution grant this identity, and it comes with specific rights and responsibilities. Being a high school principal is an I-identity because the school district authorizes the position.

The *discursive perspective*, or D-identity, is a trait ascribed to a person by other individuals through discourse and dialogue. What people say about an individual and how they interact with that person contribute to the existence of that identity. For instance, if people describe someone as an extrovert, they are recognizing aspects of that
person’s personality within certain contexts. When other people say a person is outgoing and expressive, that person becomes identified as such.

The affinity perspective, or A-identity, is derived through participation in certain group experiences or practices. A person chooses to develop affiliation with a group or activity. For example, a person who enjoys tennis and plays regularly with a group of people creates an A-identity for herself as a tennis player.

The lines between Gee’s (2000) four identity perspectives are flexible and any specific identity can be interpreted through various lenses. Gee (2000) used the identification of a child with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) as an example to show how one identity can be viewed from different lenses. A doctor might base a diagnosis on biological factors that influence a child’s behavior, so that would be an N-identity because it is based on nature. Within a school setting, the ADHD label can be viewed as an I-identity because it is bestowed by an institution and may entitle the child to receive special services. However, if children at the school describe a student as hyper and repeatedly label him as ADHD, that becomes a D-identity derived from their discourse. ADHD may become an A-identity if the child willingly participates in and affiliates himself with a therapy group to help manage his condition.

For any specific identity to work, others must recognize it as defining a particular “kind of person” (Gee, 2000, p. 99). Certain combinations of ways of speaking, acting, dressing, feeling, and using technology must be recognized as being associated with a particular “kind of person” to function as an identity marker. These markers change over time and vary between societies. This shows there are clear connections between Gee’s
perspectives on identity and Wenger’s (1998) explanation of identity through social learning theory. Gee explained that individuals can negotiate how others perceive various attributes of identity, but the way in which others recognize these identity traits is out of the individual’s control. In other words, someone may desire others to view her as a certain “kind of person”, so she takes actions she thinks will make that happen. However, if others fail to recognize those actions as attributes of the desired identity, they will not ascribe that identity to her. Wenger (1998) described identity formation as a dual process in which “our identities form in this kind of tension between our investment in various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts” (p. 188). Hence, the process of identity formation transpires simultaneously in personal and social realms.

Identity and Power

Like Gee, Wenger (1998) acknowledged that issues of power are central to identity formation: “A social concept of identity entails a social concept of power and, conversely, that a discussion of power must include considerations of community, negotiation of meaning, and identity” (p. 190). Figure 2 shows how individual identity formation is interconnected with community, power, and meaning.
The issue of power is an important part of *identity politics*, the tendency of specific identity groups to promote their own interests ahead of those of other racial, social, ethnic, religious, or cultural groups or larger society as a whole (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.d). Gee (2000) noted that hegemonic forces in capitalist societies encourage nonelites to accept the inferior identities ascribed to them and support the elite identities attributed to those with more access and mobility. In other words, dominant groups have more power in maintaining the status quo identities that keep them in power and suppress other groups. This issue is particularly relevant in the field of education. Cummins (2000) and Tollefson (1995) described how education policies reflect power structures that are present in society as a whole. These authors viewed classrooms as sights of linguistic and cultural struggle, and they positioned educators as agents of power that can enact meaningful changes for culturally and linguistically diverse groups who may be ascribed identities that lack power.
Teacher Identity

In the field of education, the term *teacher identity* refers to the process through which teachers continually integrate their understandings of themselves as individuals within the context of their complex and evolving profession (Clarke, 2009; Gee, 2000; Olsen, 2012). Wenger (1998) claimed, “Education in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities—exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state” (p. 263). Therefore, learning and identity formation are both lifelong processes. The world in which teachers live and work is becoming more diverse. These changes require teachers to open themselves up to new ways of thinking, being, and working. Within such a dynamic world and workplace, teacher identities must also become more fluid and multifaceted (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Wenger, 1998). To accomplish this task, teachers need opportunities to reflect on the role of identity in their lives and in their work.

Doing Identity Work

Recognizing that identity is complex, dynamic, ambiguous, and multidimensional, Clarke (2009) developed a framework for thinking about teacher identity that uses Foucault’s (as cited in Clarke, 2009) four axes of ethics. Clarke used the term *ethico-politics* to describe how the ethical self interacts with social discourse and power relations in the creation of identity. Clarke (2009) claimed that wherever there is power, there also exists freedom. Within this freedom individuals must make choices. These choices are a form of ethics—a social shaping of the self. Clarke explained that Foucault’s notion of *ethics* was not a moral code but rather about caring for the self.
Based on the idea that teacher identity formation is an exercise in ethico-politics, in other words a way of caring for the self, Clarke (2009) created a diagram for “doing identity work” (p. 190). Figure 3 shows this diagram with added explanations of the four axes that constitute the ongoing process of teacher identity development. The first axis is the substance of teacher identity which pertains to the intellectual and emotional aspects of being a teacher. When engaging in critical reflection, a teacher might ask, “How are teaching and being a teacher related to other facets of my identity?” The second axis involves the sources of authority from which teacher identity arises. A question for this category would be: How are a teacher’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors shaped by external political and axiological forces? The third axis is about how people think about their teaching and how they develop knowledge that shapes their practice. A teacher might ask, “What teaching techniques and practices do I cultivate? How do I grow my teaching practice?” The fourth axis is the telos of teacher identity which is the purpose, goal, or reason one has for being a teacher. Some teachers may see the goal as earning an income to support their family; others may aspire to make a difference in the world or empower their students. Like Gee’s (2000) perspectives on identity, Clarke’s (2009) four components of identity help illustrate that teacher identity is an amalgamation of personal and social elements that are always in flux.
Clarke (2009) noted that there is no right or wrong way to constitute a teaching identity and identified several paradoxes that underlie the process of identity construction:

- **Agentive paradox**—One cannot know one’s self outside of a socially constructed context.
- **Differential paradox**—One can only conceive of one’s own identity by contrasting it with what one is not.
• Paradox of excesses—One’s understanding of one’s identity is never complete; it is beyond comprehension; it is impossible to capture a complete self. (p. 188)

These paradoxes are fundamental to the continuous and iterative nature of identity construction.

When teachers become more aware of the process of developing a teacher identity, they open themselves to personal and professional transformation. Clarke (2009) explained,

Recognizing that our identities, like our pedagogical practices, should not be predetermined, but need to be continually renegotiated within specific contexts, leaves open the possibility that our pedagogical certainties might be transformed by encounters with others and by exploration of others’ ideas. Here again, identity work and ethics are inextricably linked to the operation of critique. (pp. 194-195)

Clarke’s idea that critical reflection on identity can help teachers improve their practice is foundational to my research.

Teacher identity is a useful analytic tool for education research (Clarke, 2009; Gee, 2000; Olsen, 2012). Olsen (2012) extolled the benefits of using teacher identity as a lens for analyzing practice and conducting research because:

(a) It encourages a view of teachers both as sociocultural products of their times and places and as active agents continually constructing themselves inside the give-and-take of actual educational practice;
(b) It foregrounds a view of teachers as always diverse in their own intersecting, complex but identifiable ways;

(c) It offers a holistic framework for how teachers and teacher educators can identify and learn to adjust their professional identities in relation to diversity and education; and

(d) It encourages sensitive ecological research that is mindful of teachers as multifaceted, whole persons whose professional development is always in progress. (p. 1124)

In other words, the lens of teacher identity provides an opportunity to view teachers and the complex work they do in a holistic, multidimensional, contextualized, and respectful way. It is an analytical tool that allows exploration of the ways in which teachers socially negotiate and construct identities for themselves and how that process relates to their teaching practice.

Researchers have found that reflecting on identity can influence teacher practices and beliefs about CLD students (Allard & Santoro, 2006, 2008; Xu, 2012). Allard and Santoro (2006) examined how Anglo-Australian preservice teachers constructed their own ethnic and class identities and how they made sense of working with students from different backgrounds. These researchers found that many participants expressed growing understanding of diversity and became less judgmental over the course of the study, but other participants firmly held on to the belief that ethnic, racial, linguistic, and class differences do not matter and used that belief as a defense mechanism to avoid conflict (Allard & Santoro, 2006). In a later study of in-service teachers, Allard and
Santoro (2008) found that teachers sometimes oversimplified differences, but they were also able to critique and reflect on their own assumptions in order to work more effectively with students from various ethnic and social class backgrounds.

In an investigation of how Chinese ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) teachers’ professional identities transformed as they moved from being preservice to novice teachers, Xu (2012) found that participants’ identities underwent significant changes during the first few years of teaching. Identities formed by institutional forces and shaped by perceived successes and failures in their practice replaced their preconceived notions of teacher identity. This study provides evidence of the dynamic and contextual nature of teacher identity.

The literature also provides examples of how teacher identity impacts work with linguistically diverse students (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Miller et al., 2017). In a theoretical work describing a transdisciplinary framework for understanding “the multifaceted nature of language learning and teaching” (p. 25), the Douglas Fir Group (2016) declared that all “language learning is identity work” (p. 31). In an introduction to an issue of Modern Language Journal devoted to language teacher identity, De Costa and Norton (2017) expanded that notion by saying all “language teaching is identity work” (p. 8). As empirical evidence of this, Miller et al. (2017) showed how a language arts teacher working in a multilingual elementary classroom transformed his identity as an insecure novice to a self-assured effective teacher by participating in professional development that focused on reflective practices. Miller et al. concluded that ongoing critical
reflection by teachers can foster self-awareness and inspire action-oriented practices. Similarly, research by D’warte (2014) and Higgins and Ponte (2017) revealed that teachers changed their deficit perspectives of multilingual students and increased their expectations of students’ abilities when they participated in professional development opportunities that explored identity issues and encouraged teachers to support one another in continued efforts to improve education for linguistically diverse students. These studies demonstrate the important role that identity plays in teaching, various ways that it informs practice, as well as the potential for using critical reflection on identity as a tool for improving pedagogy.

Nieto (2013) claimed, “Teachers cannot negate their own identity and power when interacting with students, but they can attempt to understand their identity as intertwined with those of the students they teach” (p. 126). Through their interactions with students, teachers also influence and shape the identities students construct for themselves (Clarke, 2009; Yoon, 2008). Consequently, teachers have a professional and ethical obligation to engage in identity work to become more aware of those influences (Clarke, 2009). It is essential for educators to critique aspects of their own identity and positionality in order to develop practices and curriculum that incorporate and appreciate the perspectives of CLD students (Santoro, 2009).

Culture and Diversity

The concepts of culture and diversity are intricately bound to one another. The meaning of these terms is frequently debated in academic and political realms (Bullivant, 1993; Erickson, 2012; Gorski, 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2012; Lindsey et al., 2003; Nieto &
This section is an exploration of the concepts of culture and diversity and how they impact teaching practice.

Culture

The term *culture* was originally used in the field of anthropology to describe patterns of human behavior throughout history and around the world (Erickson, 2012). Early understandings of culture viewed these patterns as static and internally consistent. However, current thinking about culture maintains that it is a dynamic construct that evolves over time within groups and manifests in unique ways among individuals. In the 21st century, digital technologies have increased the rate at which different cultures interact with and influence one another (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). In modern, industrialized societies everyone is multicultural because they have developed a “distinctive personal cultural repertoire” (Erickson, 2012, p. 567) from their personal and virtual interactions in various cultural contexts.

Nieto (2017), an expert on multicultural education issues, claimed:

*Culture consists of the ever-changing values, traditions, discourses, practices, social and political relationships, and worldview shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, race, ethnicity, social class, social identity, and religion.* (p. 7)

This definition incorporates the idea that culture is variable and hybridized in today’s world. Further, it should not be oversimplified or essentialized.
The concept of culture can become problematic in numerous ways (Erickson, 2012; Gorski, 2016; Nieto, 2017; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Ponte & Higgins, 2015; Warikoo, 2012). One example is when certain cultures are viewed as superior and others inferior (Erickson, 2012). For instance, inequality is deeply rooted in school structures in the United States where White, middle-class, English speaking culture is honored, and other perspectives are typically marginalized and actively devalued (Nieto, 2017). Terms such as the culture of poverty, culturally deprived, and at-risk are used to describe cultures and students who are not considered part of the dominant mainstream culture (Erickson, 2012; Nieto, 2017). The use of this type of deficit language creates negative discourses about CLD students; however, research shows that teachers can change negative perspectives about cultural and linguistic differences through critical reflection and professional development (Allard & Santoro, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Johnson & Freeman, 2010; Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013; Shields, 2010). By rejecting deficit discourses and affirming student diversity, teachers can begin to treat all students in more equitable and just ways (Nieto, 2017).

Another problem associated with culture in schools is that it is often reduced to stereotypical sets of customs, behaviors, holidays, foods, and fashions that erroneously represent large groups of people (Erickson, 2012; Ponte & Higgins, 2015; Nieto, 2017; Nieto & Bode, 2018). This assumes that all individuals within a named cultural group share an identical set of cultural traits. Given the current understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of culture, this is a dangerous approach to understanding culture because it can result in essentializing. Essentializing culture means reducing it to a
narrow set of fixed ideas about race and ethnicity and presuming all members of a particular community exhibit similar traits (Gutiérrez et al., 2012). Holding such oversimplified views of CLD students can impair teachers’ abilities to develop culturally responsive practices (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2008; Gay & Howard, 2000; Souto-Manning, 2013). By contrast, if teachers develop more sophisticated understandings of culture and diversity, they are better prepared to work with diverse student populations.

Cultural Diversity

At its core, cultural diversity is about difference. Recognizing the ways in which humans are different from one another relies on making distinctions about human traits often related to culture, race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and ability (Warikoo, 2012). The concept of diversity is grounded in the ways that individuals see themselves in relation to other social groups. People’s philosophical and political orientations shape their views on cultural differences (Vavrus, 2012). For example, Vavrus (2012) explained that social conservatives generally view culturally diverse groups with suspicion because they think cultural heterogeneity is a threat to the common culture of a nation-state. Liberal multiculturalists tend to celebrate diversity, promote cultural tolerance, and view diverse cultures as equally legitimate; however, this perspective assumes that individuals will eventually assimilate into the dominant common culture. Critical multiculturalists, on the other hand, reject the hegemony that underlies the socially conservative and liberal multicultural perspectives. Critical multiculturalism focuses on issues of power, privilege, and social structures that allow a
dominant culture to form and marginalize other social and cultural groups. Critical multiculturalists recognize that, in multicultural communities, conflict and tension are essential components for creating an equitable and just society for people of all cultures (Vavrus, 2012). These philosophical and political orientations can influence teacher practice.

Even though the population of the United States has become increasingly diverse, most people live segregated lives (Seidl & Conley, 2009). Therefore, teachers often lack experience in diverse settings and have naïve, simplistic ideas about multicultural education (Seidl & Conley, 2009). Teachers and those learning to become teachers often report feeling unprepared to work with CLD students (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Teachers who do have some life experiences with diversity are more likely to be sensitive to and accepting of issues surrounding diversity in the classroom (McNeal, 2005). Acquah et al. (2016) found that when teachers lack personal experience with and exposure to diversity and possess little formal diversity training, they “are at an increased risk to impose their ethnocentric notions on ethnically and culturally diverse students and/or ignore them entirely in the instructional process” (p. 228). Engaging with people from different backgrounds who have different stories of experience can help people see new possibilities for their own identities, make them more critically conscious, and help them be better multicultural teachers (Seidl & Conley, 2009). In other words, when teachers work to expand their understandings of culture and identity, they can improve their teaching practices and create better opportunities for CLD students to learn.
The construct of diversity can also be problematic (Gutiérrez et al., 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Vavrus, 2012; Warikoo, 2012). First, the idea that human groups are different from one another implies that distinct lines exist among groups—a concept that may serve to separate “us” from “them” (Warikoo, 2012). These divisions can be viewed as cultural borders or boundaries. Referring to earlier work by McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979), Erickson (2012) described cultural borders as lines drawn between differences that suggest being on one side represents an advantage and the other a disadvantage. For example, being fluent in English is often valued in many school settings but being fluent in Spanish is often devalued. Alternately, when a divide is recognized as a cultural boundary, the existence of a difference is perceived and acknowledged but not positioned as a problem. Viewing cultural differences as boundaries instead of borders can make space for teachers to implement culturally responsive pedagogies (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Erickson, 2012; Mellom et al., 2018; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016).

Another complication is that issues of diversity and culture are often conflated. For example, people from the dominant culture often understand the term ethnic as a label for “others” but not for themselves (Santoro, 2009). This becomes a form of prejudice sometimes referred to as othering in which members of the dominant culture accept aspects of various “other” cultures—food, clothing, music, for example—as interesting ways to enrich their own lives. However, at the same time, other aspects of minority cultures are construed as problems when they are not seen as beneficial to the dominant group (Santoro, 2009). By failing to recognize themselves as cultural beings
(Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013), people can sometimes turn issues of difference and diversity into forms of discrimination (Nieto & Bode, 2018). In contrast, ignoring cultural differences or pretending they do not exist can “silence debates about the inequalities that do exist because of racial and ethnic difference” (Santoro, 2009, p. 38). This stance can lead to a belief that “good teaching for all students” (Stephens & Johnson, 2015, p. 41) is enough and cultural differences and issues surrounding diversity do not impact learning.

Argument Against Focusing on Culture and Diversity in Education

Not everyone believes that culture and diversity should be the focus of educational programs or research. Gorski (2016) argued that overemphasizing these issues detracts from efforts to solve the real problem in education, which he perceived as inequity. Gorski (2016) claimed that the recent “cult of culture” (p. 222) actually disrupts efforts to promote initiatives for equitable education and suggested that overemphasizing culture takes attention away from the real issues of “racism, economic injustice, heterosexism, and sexism” (p. 223) that underlie inequity in society. Gorski (2016) claimed no one really understands what the concept of culture means, and he described the phrase culturally and linguistically diverse as “empty language” (p. 223) because individuals themselves are only diverse when compared with others. Gorski maintained that inequity and injustice are issues of power, not culture; therefore, it is impossible to resolve them through efforts that focus on culture and diversity in education.

Rather than emphasizing issues related to cultural differences, Gorski (2016) recommended that researchers and education professionals concentrate on issues of
equity. He used the term *equity literacy* to describe the knowledge and skills educators need to combat injustice and inequity in all forms. Gorski posited that educators need to develop foundational knowledge about the ways that inequity impacts schools and communities, broaden their understanding of the structural barriers that shape the lives of students and their families, and become more conscious of how lack of access and opportunity create educational disparities. Gorski (2016) believed by deepening their “equity consciousness and practice” (p. 225) teachers can help fight oppression in schools and in society.

Nieto (2017) acknowledged that discussions about culture often overlook important issues of power and justice. However, Nieto (2013) also recommended that teachers “learn about the sociocultural realities of their students and the sociopolitical conditions in which they live” (p. 151). Understanding students’ cultural and linguistic differences is a starting point from which teachers can begin to develop a deeper understanding of how their own privilege, power, and biases may shape their practice and influence their relationships with students and their families (Nieto, 2013).

Banks (2012), a leading scholar on diversity and multicultural education, contended that paying explicit attention to cultural differences can address the issue of equity, which he (2012) described as a dimension of multicultural education. Banks (2012) noted, “An equity pedagogy exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, gender, and social-class groups” (p. 1543). In other words, paying attention to diversity is a means for achieving equity. In fact, researchers have found that providing teachers
with professional development opportunities to understand how the complex issues of culture, race, language, class and ethnicity influence education is an essential component for promoting equity and justice for all people in a multicultural society (Banks et al., 2001).

Although inequity is a major problem in education (Gorski, 2016), experts in multicultural education such as Banks and Nieto do not believe that honest and well-executed efforts to meet the needs of CLD students hamper progress towards a more equitable and just education for all students. Although the concepts *culture* and *diversity* are at times vague and often contested, most teachers are familiar with these terms and able to use them comfortably to explore issues of inequity and injustice in education. Any attempt to solve the issue of injustice as a whole would be a daunting and potentially demoralizing task. Teachers can use the concepts of diversity and culture to focus their efforts, recognize their agency, reflect on their practice, and embrace the power and responsibility they have to increase equity and justice in schools (Banks, 2012; Nieto, 2017; Seidl & Conley, 2009).

Cultural Competence

The term *cultural competence* “refers to an integrated knowledge base and skill set which enables professionals to work respectfully [and] effectively with individuals, families, and communities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (DeJesus, 2012, p. 504). Other terms such as *cultural proficiency, multicultural competence, or cross-cultural competence* also describe the array of attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, and capacities needed to function successfully in cross-cultural situations (DeJesus, 2012;
Milner, 2011). Cultural competency is an integral component for creating culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In other words, teachers need to be aware, respectful, and appreciative of cultural differences and actively create learning environments and opportunities that enable students to develop their own cultural competencies.

While diversity among students has been increasing in the United States, the racial and ethnic background of teachers has remained overwhelmingly White. For example, during the 2015-16 school year, 80% of all public school teachers in the United States were White (de Brey et al., 2019), but 51% of public school students were children of color (NCES, 2019). If teachers are not culturally competent, this cultural gap, or “demographic divide” as Gay and Howard (2000, p. 1) called it, can have serious negative implications for CLD students (McNeal, 2005). For example, lack of cultural appreciation and linguistic understanding can lead to teachers holding deficit views of ELs, having low academic expectations for them, and failing to engage these students in meaningful learning activities (Allard & Santoro, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Mellom et al., 2018; Pettit, 2011). To avoid these negative consequences for students, researchers recommend multicultural courses in teacher preparation programs and professional development for in-service teachers to develop cultural competence (Acquah & Commins, 2017; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Gay & Howard, 2000; McNeal, 2005).

Developing cultural competence is the first step for teachers who want to make their teaching practice more culturally and linguistically responsive. Researchers explain that the path to cultural competence starts with acknowledging one’s self as a cultural
being (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Santoro, 2009; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013). When teachers recognize the influence of culture in their own lives, they become better able to understand how it impacts their teaching:

The open-mindedness and humility that result from understanding how culture and ethnicity affect their own being and behaving also will make teachers receptive to the validity of others’ differentness. This kind of reciprocity of rights to culture and ethnicity is imperative for effective multicultural teaching. (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 9)

For teachers to be able to know and understand their CLD students, they must first know themselves and how their cultural and ethnic backgrounds inform their practices. In a case study of a White male science teacher in an urban middle school in the southeastern United States, Milner (2011) found the teacher was able to build his cultural competence and effectively work with diverse students by developing strong relationships with students, intentionally confronting race and recognizing identity as a multilayered construct for himself and his students, and viewing teaching as a communal experience that requires collaboration with colleagues and students. For the teacher in this study, implementing culturally relevant pedagogy was directly tied to developing cultural competence (Milner, 2011). The process of becoming more culturally aware begins with critical reflection, as discussed in the next section.

Critical Reflection

Teachers’ personal histories, beliefs, values, and attitudes shape their instructional practices with CLD students (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Cancienne, 2009; Higgins &
Therefore, to improve instructional practice, it is necessary for teachers to reflect on both their understanding of themselves as cultural beings and on their teaching practice. Brookfield (2017) defined critical reflection as “the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of” (p. 3) the assumptions teachers use to guide their practice. In other words, reflecting critically requires teachers to question many of the fundamental ideas they thought were simple, irrefutable truths. Who am I? Who are my students? What does good teaching look like? Does race matter? Are people mostly similar or different? By asking such questions and critiquing their long-held beliefs, teachers can open themselves to new understandings of their identity, their profession, their students, and the world of diversity. DeJaeghere and Zhang (2008) claimed, “Awareness of one’s own culture is crucial, as cultural self-awareness allows for greater understanding of one’s own cultural assumptions, values, and practices, thus enabling us to see different cultural values and practices” (p. 259). Understanding these dimensions of difference can help teachers better understand the role of culture, language, power, and privilege in their classrooms (Acquah & Commins, 2015, 2017).

Critical reflection differs greatly from reflection in the traditional sense as looking back and thinking of ways to make a practice more efficient or effective. For reflection to be critical, it must challenge existing power dynamics and interrogate hegemonic assumptions (Brookfield, 2016, 2017). In other words, for teachers to engage in critical reflection, they must examine how their interactions in school settings are governed by power structures inherent in society, and they must uncover the ways in which dominant
ideologies such as capitalism, democracy, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity shape their assumptions about teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2017). Wenger (1998) described reflection in educational settings as “looking at ourselves and our situations with new eyes” (p. 272).

Researchers have found that when teachers critically reflect on their identity, they are better able to employ more culturally relevant teaching practices (Acquah & Commins, 2015, 2017; Allard & Santoro, 2008; Santoro, 2009; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016). In a study of preservice teachers taking a course on multicultural education, Acquah and Commins (2015) found that students experienced cognitive dissonance while reflecting on cultural identity, power, and privilege; however, this dissonance resulted in improved scores on a cultural diversity awareness inventory. Allard and Santoro (2008) found that teachers can use critical reflection as a tool for developing asset-based pedagogies that value the contributions of CLD students.

In a narrative of her personal reflection, Summer (2014) detailed her experience as a White kindergartener teacher called racist by an African-American parent. Summer (2014) described a “racialized awakening” (p. 193) that forced her to examine her own actions and institutional discourses to uncover and understand the role of racial identity, White privilege, and cultural differences in her teaching. Through critical self-reflection, Summer found ways to challenge deficit perspectives, embrace counternarratives, openly explore the topic of race with students and colleagues, and honor diversity in her early childhood classroom. These examples show that when teachers reflect on their own cultural identities, they are better positioned to serve CLD students.
Critical reflection on teaching practice is also necessary to improve learning experiences for diverse students. In a study of experienced high school teachers working with ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students in Australia, Allard and Santoro (2008) found that teachers sometime oversimplified cultural differences as generalizations or stereotypes, but they also critiqued and reflected on their own assumptions in order to work more effectively with students from various ethnic and social class backgrounds. Allard and Santoro (2008) showed that critical reflection provided “insight into how ‘difference’ can be viewed not as a deficit but as a rich source for developing deeper understanding about students’ lives and the teaching and learning strategies that engage them” (p. 211).

Careful and critical examination of student behavior can also help teachers adjust their lessons and personal interactions with students. By critically reflecting on the ways she interpreted student behaviors, Isaac (2013) was able to reinterpret her students’ resistance to dominant culture norms as an expression of identity, solidarity, and a different way of being American. This allowed her to adjust her pedagogical practices to reduce the marginalization of immigrant students and create a more inclusive and democratic classroom.

Research has also shown that teacher identity and pedagogical practice are interconnected (D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Isaac, 2013; Milner, 2011; Santoro, 2009; Summer, 2014). Higgins and Ponte (2017) found that teachers’ own ethnic and linguistic identities shaped their implementation of pedagogies that promote multilingualism. Over the course of a year-long professional development project,
teachers in the study received encouragement to implement culturally and linguistically responsive teaching strategies such as using students’ home languages and cultures as resources, including parents and community members in school activities, increasing group work, and making explicit connections between oral and written language. Study results showed that the only teachers who embraced the pedagogical strategies were themselves multilingual, or they had experienced the loss of their first language (Higgins & Ponte, 2017). This study revealed that there are multiple forces at work on the complex process of teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse environments. Every teacher can benefit from critically examining their cultural and professional identity because “vestiges of racism, deficit thinking, gender bias, heteronormativity, and other preconceptions” (Olsen, 2012, p. 1124) can influence pedagogy and potentially harm students. Teachers in diverse classrooms face enormous challenges as they try to align their pedagogical practices with the unique needs of CLD students in their classrooms.

Teacher Beliefs, Biases, and Perspectives

In an exploration of the “messy construct” of teacher beliefs in educational research, Pajares (1992) stated, “Beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do” (p. 314). Pajares also noted that teachers’ beliefs about what constitutes good teaching are often fossilized notions born out of teachers’ own classroom experience as children. This “early enculturation in developing educational beliefs” (Pajares, 1992, p. 324) can make teachers resistant to change because they believe the methods used when they were in school are adequate for
teaching children today. However, the increasing diversity of students necessitates change in contemporary classrooms. As Pajares (1992) noted, “Little will have been accomplished if research into educational beliefs fails to provide insights into the relationship between beliefs, on the one hand, and teacher practices, teacher knowledge, and student outcomes on the other” (p. 327).

Researchers have shown that teachers’ beliefs shape their instructional practices (Mellom et al., 2018; Pettit, 2011; Yoon, 2008). To serve CLD students better, teachers must find ways to counteract deficit discourses that frame racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences as student deficiencies and problems that need to be solved (Nieto & Bode, 2018). Adopting asset-based pedagogies that view differences as valuable assets for learning can help educators create spaces in which CLD students can flourish academically, emotionally, and socially (Nieto & Bode, 2018). In-service teachers often lack knowledge about second language acquisition, multicultural principles, and cultural differences; these gaps in teacher knowledge make it difficult for teachers work effectively with CLD students in the mainstream classroom (Pettit, 2011). D’warte (2014) found that when teachers and students worked together as coresearchers to study students’ linguistic abilities explicitly, students developed improved metalinguistic awareness and intercultural competencies, and teachers changed their deficit perspectives of multilingual students and increased their expectations for students.

Teachers often struggle to find practical tools for examining their own biases and beliefs about students (Chen et al., 2009). This is problematic because when teachers lack personal experience with and exposure to diversity and have little formal diversity
training, they “are at an increased risk to impose their ethnocentric notions on ethnically and culturally diverse students and/or ignore them entirely in the instructional process” (Acquah et al., 2016, p. 228). Acquah and colleagues (2016) suggested that teachers need “real opportunities to confront the issues of diversity including racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as confront their own prejudices and worldviews through consistent reflection” (p. 229) and recommended that educators use professional discussion groups as a mechanism for exploring the connections between personal experiences, beliefs, and teaching practices. Other researchers have shown that teachers do have the capacity to change their racial and cultural biases if they have safe spaces, adequate time, and meaningful resources for doing so (Shockley & Banks, 2011).

Professional development opportunities can also shape the way teachers think about students, help them gain knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity, and facilitate the adoption of asset-based perspectives (Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013; Pettit, 2011). In an examination of teachers’ beliefs about Latino student achievement, Mellom et al. (2018) discovered that teachers who received professional development in culturally responsive teaching practices and participated in systematic instructional conversations developed more positive attitudes about students using Spanish in the elementary classroom and changed their deficit perspectives over time. Molle (2013) found that professional development focused on building CoPs allowed teachers to see their schools and classrooms as places where changes in practice can improve academic success for ELs. Molle (2013) also claimed that professional development can help educators “acquire tools and habits of work and mind that can help them better meet the
evolving and varied needs of their students” (p. 206). In other words, teachers were able to change their beliefs about multilingual students and improve their pedagogy to meet the needs of CLD students by working collaboratively in a professional learning community.

Researchers have also shown that critical reflection can serve as a tool for overcoming deficit perspectives (Allard & Santoro, 2008; Summer, 2014). DeJaeghere and Zhang (2008) explained that cultural self-awareness is a prerequisite for being able to critique assumptions, recognize different cultural values, and understand the influence of beliefs on practice. Once teachers recognize themselves and their students as cultural beings (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013), they are better able to appreciate the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) students bring to the classroom, thereby making them more likely to adjust their pedagogy and utilize these assets as tools for learning. Nieto (2017) contended, “Rejecting deficit discourses and affirming diversity is the first step to treating students with equity and justice” (p. 6). CoPs can provide teachers with opportunities to collaboratively engage in reflection that leads to changes in perspective.

Communities of Practice as Professional Learning

In educational settings, professional learning opportunities often occur in the form of CoPs (Borg, 2012; Brody & Hadar, 2011; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Patton & Parker, 2017). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) noted that CoPs are particularly relevant in education because in schools “learning is not only a means to an end; it [is] the end product” (p. 5). In other words, learning within a CoP focused on improving
educational outcomes for students can have far-reaching effects that impact student learning inside the institution, students’ abilities to connect with broader communities beyond the school, and students’ perspectives about lifelong learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoPs can provide teachers at all levels—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary—with chances to collaboratively explore aspects of teaching, learn from one another, and critically reflect on practice (Aldana & Martinez, 2018; Borg, 2012; Brody & Hadar, 2011; DeMeulenaere, 2015; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Hodges & Cady, 2013; Patton & Parker, 2017). Scholars have also found various ways of conceptualizing the learning that happens within a CoP (Brody & Hadar, 2011; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Patton & Parker, 2017).

Conceptualizing Learning in Communities of Practice

Research on the use of CoPs for professional development for teacher educators has resulted in different understandings of how learning transpires within a CoP. In a study of physical education teacher educators, Patton and Parker (2017) determined that collaboration in a CoP was a process that started with creating a safe space and progressed to defining a common focus. Interactions over time led participants to develop personal and professional relationships based on trust that allowed members to confront challenging ideas and take risks. Patton and Parker (2017) found that CoPs can provide a venue for teacher educators to reduce feelings of isolation, improve collaboration, motivate professional growth, and expand educators’ capacities for effective teaching and productive research.
Other scholars described learning within a CoP as happening in layers or stages. Hadar and Brody (2010) conducted a year-long study of a professional development community at a teachers’ college in Israel and found that working within a CoP resulted in a layered model of change for participants. The first of three sequential layers involved teachers breaking down barriers that isolated them from other disciplines, creating a safe environment for taking risks, and developing new relationships. These interactions facilitated discussions about student learning within the group and led to the second layer of improving teaching practice. As time passed, participants reached the third layer in which they experienced professional learning that resulted in increased competence and self-efficacy.

In another study, these same researchers characterized professional learning in a CoP as a series of stages. Examining the effect of participating in a CoP on teacher educators’ professional growth trajectories, Brody and Hadar (2011) found that this type of professional development was nonlinear, and it occurred in four stages. The first stage was initial enthusiasm for, anticipation of, and curiosity about new personal and professional growth. Following this stage was a period of withdrawal in which participants resisted new learning, identified impediments to implementing new teaching techniques, and expressed confidence in and dedication to their current practices. At this point some participants dropped out of the CoP, but those who remained either continued to oppose change or altered their perspectives and moved into the third stage, awareness. In the awareness stage, participants became motivated to set new goals and incorporate new learning into their teaching practice. The final stage was enacting change in their
teaching practice. Whether individuals understand learning in a CoP as a process or a series of layers or stages, research shows that this type of collaborative learning can have many benefits for educators.

Teacher Learning in Communities of Practice

CoPs can be beneficial to experienced teachers as well as students in teacher preparation programs. For instance, Lee et al. (2017) found that students in a multicultural education master of education program valued collaborative learning and felt supported within their CoP at the university; however, once they were hired by a school they often lacked support from colleagues and administrators to effectively implement multicultural practices in their classrooms. Lee et al. (2017) also found that three to five years later graduates of the program “continued to use the shared repertoire they learned in the program,” (p. 15), and they sometimes resented “the lack of opportunity to collaborate and teach in ways that reflected sensitivity to diversity in their current educational settings” (p. 15). In other words, once employed, these new teachers missed the feeling of mutual engagement and joint enterprise that they experienced in the CoP part of their teacher certification program.

Researchers have also examined the use of CoPs in elementary, middle, and high school settings. For example, in an urban elementary school in northern California, school leaders, teachers, and an educational consultant formed a CoP to address a school culture that was having negative effects on student academic outcomes (DeMeulenaere, 2015). In the study, members of the CoP systematically shifted the focus of professional development to emphasize the most effective teachers at the school rather than devoting
resources to the remediation of less effective teachers. By highlighting successful teachers and encouraging them to share their practices with others, the leadership team was able to transform the adult culture in the school, retain more teachers, and begin the process of school improvement. In this case, the CoP proved to be a powerful tool for change (DeMeulenaere, 2015).

Sustaining CoPs over time can be challenging. Hodges and Cady (2013) examined how a blended model (online synchronous, online asynchronous, and face-to-face meetings) of professional development for middle school math teachers fostered the development of CoPs across a district and within individual schools. These researchers found contextual factors at each school influenced how teachers were able to maintain a CoP after the professional development series ended. The evolution of CoPs was more successful in schools where teachers frequently had opportunities to observe other teachers, had common planning time, and perceived agency for implementing instructional changes. When these conditions were not present, full-fledged CoPs failed to form.

CoPs can provide teachers and school staff with opportunities to learn from colleagues who are struggling with similar problems. Aldana and Martinez (2018) showed that teachers, counselors, and administrators from four high schools in northern California were able to work together in a CoP to support newcomer Spanish-dominant students and their families in an online learning project that delivered science and math instruction in Spanish. With the guidance of university researchers, the members of this CoP felt supported in the group, and they were able to improve their knowledge of
academic Spanish and strengthen their ability to deliver content knowledge to newcomers. Additionally, the CoP provided a network for collaboration and resulted in participants being better prepared to leverage Spanish-dominant students’ funds of knowledge and linguistic capital. This CoP helped multiple stakeholders join forces to improve learning experiences for a group of students often overlooked and underserved. Working together in a CoP, these educators were able to accomplish more than they might have separately (Aldana & Martinez, 2018).

Some teachers struggle to apply research to their daily teaching. Buysse and colleagues (2003) suggested that CoPs can provide “a framework for integrating educational research and practice” (p. 265) because CoPs offer educators the opportunity to work together to conduct research focused on improving their pedagogical practices. Sighting earlier studies, Buysse et al. demonstrated how features of CoPs—common purpose, diverse membership, participatory structures, and connections with larger communities—support action research that results in improved teaching practice.

However, making substantive changes to practice takes time. As Brody and Hadar (2011) concluded, “Achieving pedagogic change involves slow progression as well as phases of regression in an extended journey. Moreover, achieving pedagogical change involves not only acquiring knowledge about a new pedagogy but also implementing the desired change” (p. 1232). In a report synthesizing research on professional development for teachers, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) concluded that teachers need sustained, focused, intensive, and collaborative learning opportunities to
facilitate gains in students’ academic achievement. Unfortunately, few teachers in the United States are getting this type of professional learning:

The nation lags in providing public school teachers with chances to participate in extended learning opportunities and productive collaborative communities in which they conduct research on education-related topics; to work together on issues of instruction; to learn from one another through mentoring or peer coaching; and collectively to guide curriculum, assessment, and professional learning decisions. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 27)

The literature cited here indicates that CoPs can provide teachers at all levels with a mechanism for exploring, critiquing, and improving their practice in collaborative settings. Teachers also frequently experience pedagogical change and personal transformation as a result of participating in CoPs.

Transformative Learning and Changing Frames of Reference

Mezirow (2009) defined transformative learning “as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)—sets of assumption and expectation—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (p. 92). He described a frame of reference as a set of ideas or assumptions that influence perceptions and emotions and, ultimately, guide a person’s understanding of the world. Frames of reference are constructed from habits of mind and points of view. Habits of mind are patterns of thinking influenced by cultural and social norms and highly ingrained in the human psyche. Habits of mind manifest as particular points of view that shape a person’s
interpretation of experience (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are more fixed, while people’s points of view may change as they assimilate and accommodate new information. An individual’s frame of reference may be transformed through critical reflection and changes in habits of mind or when there has been a significant accumulation of changes in his or her points of view (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow (1997, 2009) used ethnocentrism as an example of a habit of mind that predisposes people to consider those belonging to their own ethnicity as superior to those belonging to other groups. An ethnocentric habit of mind may result in people developing “negative feelings, beliefs, judgements, and attitudes” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 93) about individuals or groups of people outside their own ethnic group. Mezirow noted that positive interactions with people from different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds can alter individuals’ ethnocentric point of view but may not change ingrained habits of mind about those they perceive as others. However, “becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is the key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9).

Mezirow (2009) explained that engaging in transformative learning requires critical reflection on assumptions, voluntary participation in ongoing discourse, acting on transformed perspectives, and acquiring new dispositions. This process often involves experiencing a disorienting dilemma, feeling fear or shame, exploring new roles and relationships, making plans to act differently, acquiring skills and knowledge needed to enact these plans, developing self-confidence to support new perspectives, and integrating a new frame of reference into one’s life (Mezirow, 2009). People frequently
reject ideas that do not align with their preconceived notions about how the world works. However, in certain situations, people have the capacity to transform the underlying frames of reference that guide their understanding of experience. Mezirow (1997) explained, “When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (p. 5). Participating in a CoP to reflect on teaching practice can provide many of the conditions necessary for changing frames of reference and experiencing transformative learning.

Conclusions From Literature Review

Several important ideas emerged from this literature review. First, teachers’ personal histories, beliefs, values, and attitudes shape their instructional practices (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Cancienne, 2009; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Mellem et al., 2018; Pettit, 2011; Song, 2016; Yoon, 2008). It follows then that teacher identity and pedagogical practice are interconnected (D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Isaac, 2013; Milner, 2011; Santoro, 2009; Summer, 2014). To rephrase, the complex and socially negotiated self-concepts teachers bring to their work influence their teaching practices.

Second, critically reflecting on identity can influence teacher practices and beliefs about CLD students and potentially lead to more culturally responsive teaching practices (Acquah & Commins, 2015, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2006, 2008; De Costa & Norton, 2017; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Santoro, 2009; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Summer, 2014; Xu, 2012). Conversely, a lack
of knowledge about, or oversimplified views of, diversity can impair teachers’ abilities to work effectively with CLD students (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2008). Thus, one way to improve practice with diverse students is intentional exploration of one’s cultural identity and biases.

Third, to begin the process of developing cultural competence, teachers must first acknowledge themselves as cultural beings (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Santoro, 2009; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Seidl & Conley, 2009). Professional learning opportunities within supportive communities that encourage critical reflection on identity can help teachers develop self-awareness and facilitate the adoption of asset-based perspectives (Allard & Santoro, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Johnson & Freeman, 2010; Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013; Shields, 2010; Shockley & Banks, 2011).

Finally, CoPs can provide supportive and collaborative professional learning opportunities for teachers to engage in critical reflection and work together to improve practice (Aldana & Martinez, 2018; Borg, 2012; Brody & Hadar, 2011; DeMeulenaere, 2015; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Hodges & Cady, 2013; Patton & Parker, 2017). Hence, a study of teachers using critical reflection within a CoP to explore the intersection of culture, identity, and teaching practice may provide insights that could lead to improved educational experiences for CLD students.

Gap in Literature and Importance of Study

This literature review also revealed certain gaps in the research surrounding cultural diversity in classrooms and teachers using critical reflection on identity in relation to their practice with diverse students. Santoro and Kennedy (2016) examined
professional standards documents from five culturally diverse English-speaking nations and discovered silences and omissions in the standards regarding teachers’ knowledge about their ethnic/cultural selves, as well as a general lack of specific advice on how to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. Several studies have investigated the ways preservice teachers conceptualize diversity and develop cultural consciousness within their practice (Acquah & Commins, 2015, 2017; Allard & Santoro, 2006; Santoro, 2009). Researchers have shown that preservice teachers’ attitudes about multicultural education improved after experiencing a combination of group activities, readings, and written critical reflections (Acquah & Commins, 2015), and that engaging in small group activities and dialogue centered on dimensions of diversity such as power, privilege, and difference resulted in high levels of cultural awareness and critical consciousness (Acquah & Commins, 2017). Other researchers have examined how preservice teachers construct identities for themselves when teaching students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and found that it is essential for educators to critique their own ethnic identity and positionality in order to develop practices and curriculum that incorporate and appreciate the perspectives of CLD students (Allard & Santoro, 2006; Santoro, 2009). However, there is a lack of research on in-service teachers engaging in these types of critically reflective experiences.

A review of research conducted in the United States (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014, Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Yoon, 2008), Finland (Acquah et al., 2016) and Australia (Allard & Santoro, 2008) regarding in-service teachers’ experiences developing cultural awareness and understanding the role identity plays in pedagogical practice reveal it is
vital for teachers at all levels—elementary (Mellom et al., 2018; Summer, 2014), middle (McGriff, 2015; Milner, 2011), and high school (Allard & Santoro, 2008)—to reflect on the ways in which their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences influence their practice. A plethora of research also exists on how professional development can influence teachers’ development of cultural competence and increase culturally responsive practices (Auslander, 2018; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; McGriff, 2015; Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013; Song, 2016).

This literature review fully supports the notion that teachers need “real opportunities to confront the issues of diversity including racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as confront their own prejudices and worldviews through consistent reflection, and to practise [sic] the knowledge and skills gained” (Acquah et al., 2016, p. 229). However, this review of literature also reveals a lack of understanding about how that process transpires for teachers voluntarily working together in a CoP with a collective goal of better understanding their own cultural identity and improving their pedagogy.

Investigations of highly structured, proprietary professional development programs focused on how linguistic and cultural diversity can increase teachers’ perceived level of intercultural competence and instructional confidence with English learners (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Song, 2016) and help educators “acquire tools and habits of work and mind that can help them better meet the evolving and varied needs of their students” (Molle, 2013, p. 206). These types of formal professional leaning
opportunities may be prohibitively expensive for many schools or districts. Furthermore, teachers might resent the requirement to participate and sacrifice their planning time.

Other researchers found that school staff can work collaboratively in smaller, less formal groups to explore teacher identity and provide academic, social, and emotional support for diverse students (Auslander, 2018; Higgins & Ponte, 2017). Auslander (2018) showed that a group of nine teachers, counselors, and administrators at one high school for newly arrived English learners in New York City was able to use collaboration, shared leadership, dedication of resources, and focused interventions to create a welcoming environment that helped these students achieve academically and overcome emotional issues both in and out of the classroom.

In another study, two university researchers collaborated with 15 elementary teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse schools in Hawaii (Higgins & Ponte, 2017). Higgins and Ponte (2017) found that teachers who voluntarily participated in their year-long professional development courses developed affinity-based identities that allowed them to bond through the experience and support one another in continued efforts to improve education for multilingual students even after the project ended. These studies suggest that smaller groups composed of teachers participating in professional development of their own choosing may result in greater satisfaction for participants and better outcomes for students than more structured, top-down approaches.

CoPs may be a useful arrangement for teachers to work in small collaborative groups to discuss issues of culture, identity, and diversity and how those elements intersect with teaching practice. Wenger (1998) noted that CoPs are essentially informal,
organic, and initiated by interested participants. These features distinguish them from more structured, results-based, and externally imposed enterprises such as professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2010). However, there is a dearth of research about how teachers can use CoPs to engage in critical reflection on their cultural identities and pedagogies. For that reason, research is necessary to fill this gap in the literature. This study contributes to the existing body of educational research by showing how in-service middle school teachers can use CoPs to better understand themselves as cultural beings and explore the ways in which their cultural identities relate to their work with diverse students. It also provides insights into how teachers experience critical reflection and how they believe such reflection may influence their teaching practices.

Summary

This chapter began with a review of the research questions that guided this study and an explanation of the procedures used to conduct the literature review. Following this was an explanation and justification for utilizing the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study. Next, I provided background information and presented empirical research related to the topics of identity, culture, diversity, cultural competence, critical reflection, and teacher biases and beliefs. I also included a review of research on ways to use CoPs for teachers’ professional learning and a description of how transformative learning results in changed frames of reference. The purpose of this literature review was to show how my research related to previous literature on these topics and demonstrate a need for research on how teachers can work within a CoP to explore their identities in relation to their work with CLD students.
In summary, I utilized Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory as a theoretical framework for this study. Wenger’s theory explains how learning is a social phenomenon that transpires in natural ways among people who share a common interest and a desire to improve their performance in that area. Learning within a CoP is an ongoing process that helps people make meaning of experience, changes the way they practice, creates new resources for practice, and shapes people’s identity. As Wenger (1998) claimed, “Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (p. 215). This theory provides a framework for exploring teacher identity as it relates to improving teaching practices for CLD students. Wenger (1998) maintained, “The transformative practice of a learning community offers an ideal context for developing new understandings because the community sustains changes as part of an identity of participation” (p. 215). This theory provides justification for a study that utilizes a CoP as a space where teachers can work together to examine the influence of identity on their practice.

Culturally responsive pedagogy served as a conceptual framework for this study because it provided a context for understanding teaching practice in an increasingly diverse society. Culturally responsive teachers value the lived experiences and cultural ways of knowing that students bring to the classroom and utilize that knowledge to create meaningful and academically challenging learning experiences for all students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Becoming culturally responsive is more about developing a mindset that embraces diversity than it is about using a specific set of teaching strategies (Milner, 2011). Therefore, approaching this study through the lens of
Culturally responsive pedagogy provided a way to understand better how teachers can use critical reflection on culture, identity, and practice to develop asset-based perspectives of CLD students.

The section on identity explained how social scientists conceptualize identity as both an individually created self-concept and as a product of social interactions. Wenger (1998) viewed the individual and the communal as mutually constitutive and believed that identity formation happens within CoPs. Illeris (2014) described modern Western identity as having three layers: a core identity at the center, surrounded by a personality layer, and an outer preference layer. Gee (2000) defined identity as a way of being recognized by one’s self and others as a particular kind of person. Clarke (2009) developed a framework that illustrates the complex set of forces that influence the ongoing process by which teachers create personal and professional identities within the context of the dynamic field of education. Also included was research showing that reflection on identity can affect teachers’ beliefs about CLD students and can be used to make teaching practices more culturally responsive (Allard & Santoro, 2006, 2008; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Xu, 2012).

Next, I explained how the terms culture and diversity are closely intertwined and frequently debated. Culture is a complex and dynamic concept that is in constant flux. It is not possible to simplify culture to any one single element such as race, language, social class, religion, nationality, or gender because each member of any cultural group will exhibit a unique combination of traits. The concept of diversity depends on socially
recognized differences. People’s philosophical and political orientations influence the way they see themselves in relation to other social groups. This can become problematic when people essentialize cultural constructs or discriminate based on cultural stereotypes. Culture and diversity are also closely related to issues of power and privilege because many view White, middle-class, English speaking culture as superior to others in the United States (Nieto, 2017).

Issues of culture and diversity have become increasingly important in schools because a cultural mismatch exists between students and teachers. In 2015, half of all U.S. public school students were children of color; however, 80% of their teachers were White (de Brey et al., 2019; NCES, 2019). This cultural gap or “demographic divide” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 1) can negatively affect learning for CLD students (McNeal, 2005; Yoon, 2008) and leave teachers feeling unprepared to work with diverse populations (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014; Harper & de Jong, 2009; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Developing cultural competence is an important first step for teachers who want to create culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers can use critical reflection as a tool to recognize themselves as cultural beings and gain deeper understandings of the cultural and linguistic resources CLD students bring to their classrooms (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013). Once teachers understand how their own beliefs and identities influence their teaching practice, they can take steps to make their teaching practices more culturally responsive (Nieto, 2013).
From this review of literature, I concluded that teachers’ personal experiences and identities shape their pedagogical practice (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Mellom et al., 2018; Pettit, 2011; Yoon, 2008), critical reflection on identity can change teacher beliefs and potentially improve practice (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2006, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Miller et al., 2017; Santoro, 2009), and participating in professional learning that explores identity within the context of diversity can lead to positive outcomes for students and teachers (Allard & Santoro, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that participating in a CoP can help teachers engage in critical reflection, learn from one another, build supportive relationships, and make pedagogical changes over time (Aldana & Martinez, 2018; Borg, 2012; Brody & Hadar, 2011; DeMeulenaere, 2015; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Hodges & Cady, 2013; Patton & Parker, 2017). I also showed how there are gaps in the literature regarding teachers using critical reflection on cultural identity within the context of a CoP and teachers’ beliefs about how such reflection might influence their practice with CLD students.

Chapter 3 describes the research plan utilized in this study. Included is an explanation of and rationale for the methodology, as well as the study’s design, participants, setting, data collection plan, and data analysis procedures. In addition, Chapter 3 presents information about the steps I took to address ethical issues and promote trustworthiness.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the procedures used to conduct the literature review for this study, provided explanations of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks supporting this research, and reviewed research related to teacher identity, culture, diversity, cultural competence, critical reflection, teacher’s beliefs and biases, and communities of practice (CoPs) as sites of professional learning. This chapter describes the structure of this study and explains the research design and methodology. The chapter begins with a review of the purpose of the study and of the guiding research questions. Following this is a detailed description of the research design, site selection, and sampling procedures. Next is an explanation of the process for collecting and analyzing data. The chapter concludes with discussion of my roles as researcher and participant and the steps I took to ensure the study was trustworthy.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what happens when middle school teachers (grades 6, 7, and 8) engage in a CoP to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD). I chose to do a case study to explore how working as a group can help individual teachers reflect on and improve their practice with CLD students. Currently, there is a limited body of research about in-service teachers using critical reflection on identity to enhance pedagogy in diverse classrooms; this study adds
to the body of existing knowledge on this topic. This research may help teachers, researchers, and school leaders better understand how assumptions about culture, identity, and diversity shape pedagogical practice in 21st-century classrooms.

Research Questions Reiterated

The main research question guiding this study was:

1. What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities?

The following supporting questions helped define the focus of the study and allowed me to explore teachers’ experiences in the CoP and their beliefs about how those experiences may affect their teaching practice.

2. How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with culturally and linguistically diverse students?

3. How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Research Design and Rationale

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand how people make sense of lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike quantitative research that focuses on objectivity, structured hypothesis testing, analysis of precise numeric data, and deductive reasoning, qualitative research is concerned with subjectivity, flexible exploration, rich description of discrete cases, and inductive thinking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Another key feature of qualitative inquiry “is that
the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). That is to say, the researcher becomes a filter through which data from interviews, observations, and documents must travel; therefore, it is important for qualitative researchers to recognize and acknowledge biases in order to allow fresh perspectives to emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Later sections discuss my philosophical orientations and biases as influences on this research and the steps I took to address the impact they may have had on the results of the study.

Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore complex issues, ask open-ended questions, and use data from a small number of individuals to develop an understanding of a particular experience (Creswell, 2015). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because I explored how teachers come to understand their cultural identities through critical reflection and how they make meaning of that experience in relation to their work with CLD students. More specifically, I used a case study design to focus on how one group of teachers working together in a CoP can develop new understandings about the role identity and bias play in their teaching practice. Case study research is especially suitable when the researcher is trying to answer how and why questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015). Therefore, this qualitative study used a case study methodology to explore the intersection of culture, identity, and teaching practice generated through a process of critical reflection within a CoP.

Case Study Research

Case study research originated in the social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and political science, and more recently has emerged as a useful
method in the field of education (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Putney, 2010). According to the *Encyclopedia of Research Design*, it is difficult to define *case study* as a qualitative research method because “researchers view it alternatively as a research design, an approach, a method, or even an outcome” (Putney, 2010, p. 115). In other words, it is possible to view case study as a unit of analysis, the process of learning about a case, or the written report generated from such an inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers frequently conduct case studies, but the approach is often misunderstood because prominent methodologists have disagreed about the methods and designs used to conduct this type of research (Yazan, 2015). Much of the debate about defining case study stems from the differing approaches (Yazan, 2015) offered in Robert Stake’s (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*, Robert Yin’s (2014) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, and Sharan Merriam’s (1998) *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*.

Comparing definitions of *case study* from these seminal works provides an example of the level of disagreement about the term and gives insight into different approaches for designing studies (Yazan, 2015). Yin (2014) defined case study as “an all-encompassing method” (p. 17) of “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). To counteract the ambiguity inherent in the spaces between case and phenomenon, Yin took a rigid, prescriptive approach to case study design and discouraged researchers from making procedural changes after data collection begins (Yazan, 2015).
Stake (1995) described case study research as a “study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Stake (2003) focused on exploring and understanding one case as a “bounded system” (p. 2). Stake (2003) claimed, “Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case” (p. 134). Stake saw the value in the potential it provides a researcher to explore deeply one person, one place, one event, or one phenomenon. Contradicting Yin’s call for a logical and sequential approach to case study research, Stake (1995) suggested that researchers must use their “interpretive powers” (p. 41) and intuition to reflect the emic experiences of participants. Stake argued researchers must be highly flexible in designing studies and collecting data in order to create a holistic description of the phenomenon in context (Yazan, 2015).

Merriam (1998) incorporated elements from both Yin and Stake in her definition of case study research in the field of education as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon” (p. xiv). Merriam provided step-by-step instructions for conducting case study research but also allowed for a certain degree of flexibility to accommodate the emergent nature of qualitative research design (Yazan, 2015). I followed Merriam’s suggestions in my approach to this case study by carefully planning out the steps for data collection and analysis, but I was also prepared to make changes as needed along the way to answer my research questions to the greatest extent possible.
In this study, I viewed case study as a methodology that guided my inquiry into a bound system. Acknowledging the contributions of Yin, Stake, and Merriam, Creswell (2013) defined case study as:

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…, and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

For this type of research, defining the case under study is, in essence, defining the scope and range of the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case can be one person, a group of people, an institution, program, or community. The case, however defined, becomes the focus of the study and the unit of analysis. This is one of the features that distinguishes case study from other qualitative methods (Merriam, 2016).

In this study, the unit of analysis was the group of teachers engaged in a CoP; therefore, it was a single case, but it contained multiple units of analysis within that one case (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study focused on the ways in which the group as a whole made meaning through participation in a social community (Wenger, 1998). However, the study also explored how individual participants believed participating in the group and reflecting on identity possibly affected their practice. Yin (2014) called this single-case design with embedded units of analysis an “embedded case study design” (p. 55). This approach allows a researcher to look at the case holistically while also planning in advance to analyze subunits within the case, provides structure for the design of this case study, and aligns with Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory that
“highlights the inseparable duality of the social and the individual” (p. 14). In other words, to understand the ways in which the CoP helps foster critical reflection and thinking about teaching practices with CLD students, I also needed to pay close attention to how individual teachers within the group made meaning from the experience. *Figure* 4 graphically depicts topics of study in this research by showing the CoP as the outside boundaries of the case and the individual teachers as the subunits within the case.

*Figure* 4. The case study design with embedded cases for this research.

Case study was the most appropriate methodology for this study because it allowed me as the researcher to explore the phenomenon of teachers reflecting on cultural identity and their beliefs about the effects of that reflection on their teaching practice. The CoP established boundaries for the case study and provided a space for the social
negotiation of meaning among the member teachers who were subunits of analysis in the study.

Epistemological Stance

Yazan (2015) noted that researchers’ epistemological stances influence their perspectives on the methodologies they choose and how they implement research designs. As a researcher, I take a postmodern ontological stance in which multiple perspectives on realities are possible, and I believe individuals socially construct their knowledge. Therefore, I chose to ground this study in the constructivist principles of social learning theory and use an embedded case study design in order to reveal multiple perspectives on the experience of critically reflecting on cultural identity within a CoP and how that relates to teaching practice with CLD students.

Site and Participant Sampling

Following approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Mercer University (see Appendix H), I chose the site and participants for this qualitative study using purposeful sampling, which allows a researcher to intentionally select sites and participants that will best elucidate the topic under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2001). Patton (2001) noted that by selecting “information-rich cases” (p. 230), a researcher may gain insight and develop deeper understanding of people, places, and phenomena. Speaking about case study research in particular, Stake (2003) recommended choosing a case that provides the greatest “opportunity to learn” (p. 152) about a given phenomenon. Sampling strategies must align with the purpose of the study and the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2001). According to Creswell (2013), there are three
important considerations when using purposeful sampling in qualitative research: “the
decision as to whom to select as participants (or sites) for the study, the specific type of
sampling strategy, and the size of the sample to be studied” (pp. 154-155). Using
purposeful sampling strategies for selecting a site and participants for my study ensured
that I had the opportunity to collect rich data and develop thick description of the CoP
and the ways that teachers believe the experience may impact their teaching practice.
Site Selection

This study focused on how middle school teachers who work with culturally and
linguistically diverse (CLD) students can critically reflect on their own identities;
therefore, the site of this study was a middle school with significant numbers of CLD
students. In this study the term *culturally and linguistically diverse* refers to students
from families and communities representing a broader range of social, cultural, racial,
religious, and economic backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2011), including those that adhere
to traditions different from dominant White, middle-class, standard American English-
speaking, Judeo-Christian practices (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

I conducted the study at Wood Valley Middle School (pseudonym), located in a
racially, culturally, and economically diverse suburb of a large metropolitan area in the
state of Georgia. According to the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA,
2020) the total enrollment of the school in the 2018-2019 school year was 987 students in
grades six through eight. Students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds were 45%
Black/African-American; 24% White; 16% Hispanic; 13% Asian/Pacific Islander; and
2% multiracial. Fifty-four percent of students were considered economically
disadvantaged, and 23% were identified as limited English proficient. Academic growth for students at Wood Valley was consistently higher than other schools in the same district, and in 2018, growth was higher than 60% of schools in the state (GOSA, 2019). I purposefully chose this site because the student body was culturally, racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse. Wood Valley Middle School was also the school in which I, the researcher, worked as an ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) and language arts teacher.

Participant Selection

Within the chosen school site, I used criterion, intensity, and convenience sampling strategies to locate participants to invite to join the CoP that was the case under study. Criterion sampling means “picking all cases that meet some criterion” (Patton, 2001, p. 243). For this study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: work with CLD students, be open to exploring their own cultural identity, be willing to participate in a CoP, and be willing to share their beliefs about how the experience may affect their teaching practice.

Additionally, I employed intensity sampling to select participants who demonstrated a particular or intense interest in reflecting on their identity in relation to their work with CLD students. Patton (2001) noted that researchers can use intensity sampling to seek “excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not highly unusual cases” (p. 234). Using intensity sampling helped ensure that participants expressed interest and willingness to engage actively in the reflection and research process.
Factors such as time, money, and availability of locations and participants influence sample selection in most research studies (Merriam, 2016). These logistical constraints influence decisions about which sites and participants to include in a study. Researchers must often make sampling decisions based on what is practical and feasible within the contexts of a particular study. This practice, known as convenience sampling, is not desirable, but it occurs frequently (Patton, 2001). In this study, I experienced the constraints of time, financial resources, and my prior obligations as a full-time teacher. Additionally, the other teacher participants had limited amounts of time they could devote to participating in the CoP. These factors influenced my choice of site, participants, and duration of the study.

Stake (1995) believed that the first criterion for selecting a case should be to maximize the potential to learn about the topic under investigation. He also claimed that a “researcher should have a connoisseur’s appetite for the best persons, places and occasions” (Stake, 1995, p. 56) to include in a study. By carefully selecting participants who were already interested in exploring identity and willing to examine their teaching practices, I was able to learn the most about this topic and answer my research questions. Consequently, I relied on my previous relationships with teachers at the research site to choose participants who best met the aforementioned criteria and expressed interest in and commitment to participating in the study.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this case study was a CoP. Wenger (1998) identified three dimensions by which practice constitutes a community: “mutual engagement, a joint
enterprise, and a shared repertoire” (p. 73). This means that when I selected teachers as participants for this CoP, they required opportunities to work together, talk, and exchange information and ideas. They needed to have a sense of ownership in group efforts and make contributions to a repertoire of practices and resources for examining their identities and beliefs. To achieve this, I selected participants who had already developed working relationships with one another within one school and had “shared histories of engagement” (Wenger, 1998, p. 84) in improving their teaching practices. Although some may view this approach to sampling as convenient for me as the researcher and for the participants, it was guided primarily by the principles of social learning theory.

Sample Size

The ambiguous nature of qualitative research often means there are few firm rules to follow (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2001). Determining sample size is one such area. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended finding “an adequate number” (p. 101) of participants and sites to answer the research questions. Similarly, Patton (2001) suggested keeping the purpose of the inquiry in mind while being practical about the time and resources available for completing the project.

Case study research can examine one individual, small groups, programs, communities, and large organizations as cases. The sample size for a case study is determined when the researcher defines the boundaries of a case as the unit of analysis (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, Yin, 2014). Consequently, there are no firm rules about, or suggestions for, sample size in case study research. The sample size for this study was intentionally small to facilitate interaction among participants in the CoP. Originally, I
intended to have three to five teachers as participants, but I soon realized that having more participants from a variety of backgrounds would allow for more diverse perspectives to be heard within the group and provide more opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. In the end, 10 participants, including me, were in the study. Participants signed a consent form to participate (see Appendix I), and I assigned the participants pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Data Collection

Data for qualitative studies can come from many different sources (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The chosen methodology, theoretical framework, and the purpose of the study guide the extent to which a researcher relies on one form of data or another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case studies use multiple forms of qualitative data to generate a rich description of the topic under study and traditionally rely on interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Creswell (2013) also encouraged researchers to take advantage of innovative technological data collection methods, such as email, online discussion boards, and text messages, as viable data collection approaches for qualitative researchers. Yin (2014) advised the use of multiple data sources to develop “converging lines of inquiry” (p. 120) within a single study. For example, a researcher could use interviews, observations, and document analysis as data sources about a single phenomenon. Using this type of data triangulation helps researchers support their findings with more than one source of evidence, thereby strengthening the construct validity of their studies (Yin, 2014). Therefore, I used data from observational field notes, group meetings, documents,
surveys, and interviews to create a robust picture of participants’ experience. More specifically, I used transcriptions of group meetings, observational field notes from group meetings, documents participants generated in group meetings, text messages exchanged between participants, participant journals, teacher beliefs surveys, and interview transcriptions as data sources. Using multiple sources of data helped create a more complex picture of the process of teacher reflection on cultural identity and the ways teachers believe this experience may affect practice. The following sections relate more information about these data sources and the methods for collecting them.

Timeline for the Study

This research project transpired over the course of eight weeks during spring semester in 2019. The participants met face-to-face once a week for CoP group meetings that lasted approximately one hour. The face-to-face meetings helped to establish the CoP as a safe place to get to know one another better, share experiences, and reflect critically on our cultural identities and the ways that those identities intersect with the teaching of CLD students. We used reflection activities and discussions to explore our own cultural identities, biases, and beliefs about the diverse students we serve. Participants completed a weekly journal critically reflecting on their experiences in the meetings, in their lives, and in their teaching practices. Additional details about the meetings, journals, reflection activities, and other data collection procedures follow.

Even though I planned activities and set an agenda for each of the CoP meetings in advance, participants’ comments, interests, and engagement in group discussions guided the flow of each meeting. Social learning theory (Wenger, 1998), which provides
a theoretical framework for this study, falls within the constructivist paradigm of epistemology (Schunk, 2016). From a social constructivist point of view, humans generate knowledge and make meaning from their lived experiences, and they construct an understanding of reality through contextualized social interactions (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Wenger (1998) described learning as the active participation in the practices of a social community and the use of newly generated knowledge to construct identities in relation to that community. Therefore, it was essential to allow participants in this study to make suggestions about ways that we as a CoP could further our exploration of cultural identity and how identity relates to our teaching practice. In this way, participants were able to participate as co-constructors of knowledge in this study and engage as full participants in the CoP. Additionally, emergent and flexible design is a hallmark of qualitative research because such an approach allows researchers to make decisions during a study to obtain the best information and learn from participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of what occurred in each week of the study.

Week one. During the first meeting, I welcomed participants, thanked them for participating, reviewed the purpose of the study, and described how CoPs work. I explained that I would be functioning as both a researcher and a participant who would be engaging in the activities and reflection along with everyone else in the group. I encouraged participants to contribute ideas and resources to help us examine our cultural
identities and teaching practices, and I emphasized the importance of shared leadership within the group. We began by collaboratively establishing the following group norms:

- **Confidentiality**—What happens and what is said in this group stays in the group. Personal and private information about members should not be shared with other colleagues.
- **Time Keeping**—Start on time and end on time.
- **Assumption of Good Will**—We will assume that comments and questions by group members are not intended to be offensive or hurtful but are made with good intentions and an eagerness to learn.
- **Respect others’ points of view and be honest about our own.**
- **Make an effort to create a safe space to speak our truths.**

After establishing norms, participants completed the Teacher Beliefs Inventory: The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS) developed by Spanierman and colleagues in 2011 (see Appendix B) for the first time, and I collected the surveys. To start the self-reflection process, participants then completed the Social Identity Wheel (see Appendix A) activity adapted from LSA Inclusive Teaching (2017a) and used the corresponding questions (2017b) to facilitate a group discussion on identity. At the end of the meeting, I invited participants to write a weekly reflective journal after each meeting and explained how to access the documents via Google Docs. We agreed to continue meeting on the same day of the week and at the same time for the following weeks. I closed the meeting using a protocol called Appreciative Pause (Brookfield,
2017), in which each group member acknowledged how something that someone else said resonated with them or helped them develop a new perspective or understanding.

Week two. The second meeting began with a review of the group norms to which no one wanted to make changes or additions. We revisited the Social Identity Wheel (LSA Inclusive Teaching, 2017a) from the first meeting and continued discussion based on that activity. Next, I asked participants to complete a Diversity Profile (see Appendix C) included in materials from Stockton University (2011), and we discussed our responses and reactions to that activity. We reviewed excerpts from the first week’s journals as a way to share our thinking and encourage deeper reflection. The meeting concluded with each participant making a closing round comment, asking a question, or acknowledging another participant.

Week three. Week Three began with reading excerpts from last week’s journals because participants said they found that experience enjoyable and enlightening. The discussion that ensued took up the allotted time, so we did not do any other reflection activities during the meeting.

Week four. The fourth meeting occurred after the spring break holiday. We reviewed group norms, and I explained that we would be taking a break from face-to-face meetings to use a texting application for two weeks to communicate about our experiences with culture, identity, diversity, and teaching practice. At the recommendation of one of the group members, I also invited participants to write a short case study or narrative about an experience they had encountering cultural identity, diversity, language issues, prejudice or privilege, or discrimination in their personal lives.
or teaching practice. Using resources adapted from a Teaching Tolerance (n.d.b) professional development unit called *Unpacking Identity*, participants completed a handout called *Thinking about Our Own Identities* (see Appendix D). After discussing responses and reactions to this activity, we briefly reviewed excerpts from the previous week’s journals and concluded the meeting.

Week five and week six. During the next phase of this research project, I asked teachers to notice and reflect on issues of diversity in their daily lives and teaching practice. For approximately two and a half weeks, I sent participants a daily text message on their cellphone asking how they experienced diversity or aspects of cultural identity during that particular school day. Because cellphones are a ubiquitous part of 21st-century life, researchers have found them to be a useful tool for communicating with participants in the field (Hogarth et al., 2007; Kaleebu et al., 2013; Reimers & Stewart, 2009; Revere et al., 2015; Shirani et al., 2016; So, 2009; Spector, 2013). I used a messaging application called WhatsApp for sending and receiving messages within the group. WhatsApp (2018) is a convenient application that allows for users to send text messages, images, and voice recordings from all types of smart phones and computers. WhatsApp also provides end-to-end encryption, so the data were secure. I chose to use text messages as a data source because they allowed me to interact with participants each day without being obtrusive. The daily text messages also provided busy teachers a quick way to capture thoughts, feelings, and interactions related to the study and document their experiences with cultural identity and diversity in their daily practice. WhatsApp is a group messaging application, so exchanges among participants were
visible to all the members of the CoP. In this way, the group text thread also served as community building and reflection on practice.

To facilitate reflection during the texting phase of the study (Hole & McEntee, 1999), I asked teachers to choose one incident and write a critical reflection using a guided reflection protocol (see Appendix E). These guided reflection journals provided opportunities for teachers to think more deeply about a specific incident working with CLD students and how critically reflecting on their own cultural identity has influenced their perceptions of students, their beliefs, or their teaching practice.

Week seven. The fifth face-to-face meeting of the CoP occurred during the seventh week of the study. In this meeting, we revisited the Thinking about Our Own Identities (see Appendix D) handout from Teaching Tolerance (n.d.b) and continued to have participant-driven conversation about identity, culture, and diversity. I solicited feedback from participants on their use of WhatsApp and encouraged them to write a case study in a shared Google Doc.

Week eight. The sixth meeting was the final face-to-face gathering of the CoP. During this meeting, one of the participants shared resources she received while attending a social justice workshop, and we discussed case studies written by a few participants. I then asked participants to write a short description of their own identity based on a model proffered by Audre Lorde (2007) in which she described her own complex identity: “a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple” (p. 114). Finally, I thanked everyone for participating in the group and arranged to schedule individual interviews with each participant in the
coming weeks. I also asked teachers to complete the MTCS (Spanierman et al., 2011) for a second time at the end of the study.

Interviews: Round one. Over the following two weeks, I conducted interviews with each participant. These interviews provided each participant with an opportunity to discuss her individual experience in the CoP and share any thoughts that she did not want to divulge to the whole group. Conducting these interviews also allowed me to gather data about the teachers as embedded units of analysis within the single-case study (Yin, 2014). By paying attention to how each teacher made meaning from her participation in the CoP, I was better able to understand how social learning and critical reflection relate to teaching practice. Cross-case comparisons allowed me to examine similarities and differences among participants and develop a deeper understanding (Bazeley, 2013) of how middle school teachers can utilize CoPs to reflect critically on their own cultural identity in relation to their work with diverse students.

Interviews: Round two. As a final step, I conducted another round of interviews approximately 10 weeks later. I designed this second round of interviews to capture teachers’ beliefs about how participating in the CoP and reflecting on their own cultural identities may influence their teaching practice after they had some time to process the experience. Hall et al. (1996) showed that there can be a significant delay in teachers’ application of learning from professional development. This “sleeper effect” (Hall et al., 1996, p. 396) means that teachers need time to internalize new understandings before implementing them in practice. Therefore, I interviewed each participant a second time
shortly before the beginning of the next school year after they had time to absorb the CoP experience and while they were anticipating and planning for a new school year.

Data Collection Methods

This section provides detailed explanations of the data sources I used for this study and explains the methods for obtaining each source. Table 2 provides an overview of the types of data I collected and the timing of each collection. These data sources encompass observations, documents, journals, texts, interviews, and a survey.

Table 2

Data Collection Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Group Meeting Transcripts</th>
<th>Field Notes and/or Documents</th>
<th>Critical Reflection Journals</th>
<th>Daily Text Messages</th>
<th>Interview Transcripts</th>
<th>Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *denotes interviews conducted after last meeting; ** denotes interviews conducted approximately 10 weeks after last meeting

Observations of group meetings. The purpose of this case study was to explore how middle school teachers can use CoPs to reflect on their own identities in relation to their work with CLD students. The CoP for this study consisted of 10 teachers including myself who met as a group to explore our cultural identities, reflect on our personal
biases, and think about our teaching practice. Wenger (1998) believed that humans construct meaning about the world, their experiences, and their identities through participation in CoPs. Within the context of these communities, learning is an ongoing process that changes how we engage in practice, amends our understanding of why we practice, and creates new resources for use in practice. One method of data collection for this study was to conduct observations of group meetings. These observations provided insight into how individual group members and the group as a whole constructed knowledge, learned, and developed resources.

Observations are an important qualitative research tool because they allow a researcher to witness a phenomenon in context (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I was a participant observer (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was highly engaged as a member of the CoP in order to gain an insider’s view of the experience, but the other participants were fully aware of my role as the researcher in the study. My full participation in group meetings limited my ability to take field notes; however, I retained all documents used in or generated during these meetings, such as agendas, reflection tools, and my hand-written notes.

I recorded the audio for each face-to-face meeting utilizing my cellphone and Zoom™ online video conferencing software. I used two different platforms in order to have a backup file for each meeting in case of technical difficulties. Because I was an active participant in the meetings, I was not be able to take detailed field notes; however, I was able to add observer comments into the transcripts for each meeting. Prior to conducting the meetings, I tested all the equipment and ensured that it was working
properly and recording with sufficient clarity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). To capture the essence of the meetings and immerse myself in the data, I personally transcribed the recordings as soon as possible after each meeting and recorded analytic memos about the experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Documents. Documents are another type of data that researchers can use to answer qualitative research questions. These documents may be public records, personal documents, or artifacts from popular culture that already exist prior to the start of a study, or participants or researchers may create documents during the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I worked with participants to co-create several types of documents and artifacts as part of the research process. These documents included tools for exploration of cultural identity and personal biases, reflective journals, and text messages exchanged among the members of the CoP.

Identity reflection tools. In order to begin the process of critical reflection, the participants engaged in activities that encourage self-exploration of cultural identity and personal bias. One of the first activities participants completed was the Social Identity Wheel (see Appendix A) that I adapted from LSA Inclusive Teaching (2017a) for group discussion on identity. This reflection tool encouraged participants to examine the various ways they identify socially regarding age, religion, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, and ability or disability. I utilized the accompanying questions (LSA Inclusive Teaching, 2017b) to generate discussion within the group and prompt reflection in journals. I also
used the Diversity Profile (Stockton University, 2011) document (see Appendix C), which encouraged participants to reflect on the diversity of people they interact with in their homes, workplaces, educational environments, professional settings, and neighborhoods. Lastly, I used the Teacher Beliefs Inventory: The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (Spanierman et al., 2011) to assess participants’ knowledge about and skills for teaching multiculturally at the beginning and end of the study. A copy of the MTCS is in Appendix B.

In the last group meeting, I asked participants to write a short statement to capture their identity at that moment based on a model written by poet Audre Lorde (2007). The directions for writing the identity statement were: Think about who you are, your relationships, what you value and believe, your hobbies and interests, your personality traits, culture, and quirks. Write a description of yourself in 50 words or less that starts with the words “I am . . .”. Participants struggled with this task, and they were unable to formulate a response before the meeting ended; however, they all completed the task by the time of the second interview. Some participants stayed within the suggested word count, but others wrote considerably more. Participants’ identity statements serve to introduce them in Chapter 4.

*Critical reflection journals and other writings.* I also asked participants to keep critical reflection journals as a form of data for this study. Researchers have found that reflective journals can provide participants with a means for capturing experience, processing thoughts and emotions, and discovering meaning (Craig, 2009; Larson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2008). I utilized these critical reflection journals to capture
participants’ experiences in the CoP and record critical incidents using a guided reflection protocol (Hole & McEntee, 1999). These journal entries helped the participants and me co-construct meaning from our experiences critically reflecting on identity, from our interactions with each other as a CoP as well as with other adults in their lives, and from our interactions with CLD students in school settings. Because documents can be a useful tool for tracking change and development over time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I used the reflective journals as a source for exploring how participants developed new understandings about identity and diversity over the course of the project. I stored the journals on Google Docs as shared documents to provide easy access for both researcher and participants, as well as to ensure privacy.

I asked participants to reflect on and write about their experience in each of the weekly CoP meetings. For each reflective journal, I provided guiding questions to stimulate their thinking about group activities and facilitate reflection on their individual experiences and interactions with students. Appendix F displays the prompts given to participants after each meeting. Each journal was accessible only to me and the participant who wrote it; however, I pulled key quotes from the journals each week to share at the next meeting of our CoP to stimulate thinking and conversation among participants. Wenger (1998) asserted, “Communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning” (p. 86), and these journals helped document this learning process.

I also invited participants to write a guided reflection and a short case study. Between the fourth and fifth meeting when participants were using WhatsApp to
communicate by text, I asked them to select a specific experience and write a critical reflection following a guided reflection protocol (see Appendix E) as recommended by Hole and McEntee (1999). This was an opportunity for participants to consider a particular incident working with CLD students more intentionally and critically reflect on how their own belief, biases, and perceptions influence their teaching practice. Two participants suggested that members of the CoP write a short story or description of an experience they had involving identity, cultural differences, diversity, language issues, prejudice, or privilege in their lives or teaching practices. These “case studies”, as participants called them, were in a shared document for all members to see, and the group discussed them at the last meeting.

Text messages. Text messages were another type of document used to generate data in this study. In the United States, 98% of people earning $30,000 or more per year own a cellphone that can send text messages, and 82% of those people own a smartphone that allows for accessing the Internet, taking pictures, and running applications (Pew Research Center, 2018). Cellphones, a constant companion for many people, provide easy access to the digital world and multiple means of communication. Around the world, people send 16 million text messages every minute (Marr, 2018), and texting is often a preferred means of communication because it is quick, easy, and efficient (Mason & Ide, 2014).

Many researchers have explored using text messages as a means for collecting data in qualitative studies (Hogarth et al., 2007; Kaleebu et al., 2013; Reimers & Stewart, 2009; Revere et al., 2015; Shirani et al., 2016; So, 2009; Spector, 2013). Shirani et al.
(2016) used mobile technology to elicit data from participants in a qualitative longitudinal study and found that text messages provided a convenient and effective way for participants to reflect on their surroundings and send researchers multimodal responses as data. Hogarth et al. (2007) used text messages to collect data at random times over 10 days to collect information about perceived risk in participants’ daily lives. Teachers can also use mobile phone technologies to share lessons and develop best practices (Kaleebu et al., 2013). Due to the ubiquity of mobile phones and reliable cellular infrastructures, text messaging has been rapidly integrated into many aspects of teaching and learning, and it can provide students and educators with many options for communication (So, 2009; Spector, 2013). Although researchers occasionally experienced technical problems (Reimers, & Stewart, 2009), these studies show that text messaging can provide researchers with an innovative way to collect data in the digitally driven world.

For approximately two and a half weeks, I sent participants a text message via the WhatsApp application once a day asking them to send brief messages to document instances in which they felt cultural identity played a role in their teaching or to document interactions they had with CLD students. These messages were encrypted and securely stored. I exported the text message thread from the application, imported it into NVivo, and analyzed it as another source of data.

Interviews. Interviews were another source of data for this study. The purpose of an interview is to elicit information about an experience directly from the person who experienced it and capture the exact words that person used to describe the process
Interviews allow participants to tell their own stories, reveal their thinking, and share the ways in which they make meaning from their experience; therefore, interviews are an integral form of data for most qualitative studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). They are particularly useful in capturing behaviors like thinking and feeling that cannot be observed by other means (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Such is the case in this study that focused on teachers’ reflective thinking. Consequently, I chose to use interviews as another source of data for this study.

A variety of types and formats for interviews exist, ranging from highly structured to informal and scheduled to impromptu (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I used scheduled semistructured interviews once immediately following the main data collection period and again approximately 10 weeks later to explore how each teacher experienced participation in the CoP and how she believed the experience affected her practice with CLD students. In these semistructured interviews, I used an interview guide to focus the discussion on issues of prime relevance to the research but also to allow for flexibility in how the respondents chose to tell their stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I audiorecorded the interviews on a cellphone and on Zoom™ video conferencing software. I personally transcribed each interview as soon as possible after its conclusion. Additionally, I used informal, unstructured interviews as necessary during the study to develop rapport with participants, follow up on matters identified during group meetings, and provide answers to questions as they arose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Informal interviews occurred in
person, by phone, text, and email; I documented them in my research log and captured them electronically when possible.

I asked the following questions during the first interviews:

1. What was it like for you to reflect critically on your own cultural identity and personal biases?
2. How do you think your identity and biases impact your teaching practice with CLD students?
3. How would you describe your experience working on these topics as a small group in a CoP?
4. How do you believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity may affect your teaching practice?
5. What would have made this experience better?

In the second interviews, I asked these questions:

1. What made you want to be part of this study? Any personality traits or life or work experiences that contributed to your decision?
2. What kind of relationships did you have with the people in our group before the study? How about after?
3. What do you feel was your overall level of participation in our CoP? Full participation, active member, occasional, or peripheral. Why do you feel that way?
4. What do you feel is your level of knowledge about culture, identity, and diversity as it relates to teaching? Expert, proficient, competent, advanced
beginner, or novice. Do you think that changed at all over the course of the study?

5. (After discussing the results of participant’s Teacher Beliefs Inventory) Do you think these numbers accurately reflect your experience from the beginning to the end of the study? Why or why not?

6. Talk to me about your identity statement.

7. Now that you have had some time to let the work we did in our CoP sink in, have you had any additional thoughts about your experience critically reflecting on your cultural identity, thinking about your biases and life experiences, or your work as a teacher?

8. In what ways, if any, do you believe this experience may affect your teaching practice with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students or with your colleagues?

Data Analysis

The raw data for this qualitative study consisted of transcriptions of group meetings, participant journals, text messages, interview transcripts, documents, and field notes. I also used a research journal to keep track of my thoughts, reflections, intuitions, and speculations about the research process, methodological concerns, and data interpretations. I employed NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software package produced by QSR, to organize, manage, and analyze the large volume of collected data. I used NVivo to code transcripts, run queries, and create visual depictions of data. I stored all electronic documents and data sources for this study on password-
protected devices to keep them secure and maintain the confidentiality of participants. I also kept hard copies of documents in a secure location to protect the documents and ensure the privacy of participants.

In the qualitative paradigm, it is often difficult to delineate the steps of data collection, analysis, and interpretation because they are frequently concurrent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Creswell (2013) represented this process using a spiral to show how “the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 182). For example, while researchers are still collecting data in the field, they may also be organizing files, memoing, questioning, rereading, coding, categorizing, describing, and visualizing. This circular process allows researchers to become intimately engaged with the data, build insights as the project develops, and determine if more data is necessary or if a point of saturation has been reached (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Building on the pioneering work of Glaser and Strauss, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative data analysis as “primarily inductive and comparative” (p. 201). Inductive reasoning builds from the bottom up, from specific details and examples to broader and more general concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). In other words, qualitative researchers use specific details and patterns within the raw data to identify relationships and illuminate connections to more abstract concepts. Throughout this study, I compared each new bit of data to others already collected to identify patterns and build categories. This ongoing process of comparison and analysis allowed me to move from description of concrete units of data to more abstract levels of thinking that
revealed conceptual and theoretical understandings (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

Qualitative researchers need to use a systematic approach to help them make meaning from data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, after collecting the first pieces of data, I began the analysis process by reading the raw data multiple times, making observations, and annotating the documents. Next, I began the coding process by assigning labels to segments of data to identify salient points and capture the essence of various units of meaning within the data (Saldaña, 2016). Using my research questions as a guide, I identified meaningful segments within the transcripts, participant journals, text messages, field notes, and documents. I labeled segments with specific codes in NVivo. This first stage of initial coding is often called open coding because the researcher is open to all possible ideas that arise from the data (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this first stage of coding, I used precise descriptive terms, or in vivo phrases, to create codes that helped me organize, sort, and describe the raw data (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the study, I used a constant comparative approach to data analysis, which means that I continuously compared each unit of data to others I had previously identified and looked for similarities and differences that revealed patterns or categories within the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After open coding each data set, I reviewed the cumulative list of codes and searched for ways to group the initial codes into related categories. This second cycle of coding is known as analytical or focused coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña,
2016). During this stage, I analyzed the initial codes and the related data to synthesize the information and search for more abstract relationships between codes, concepts, and cases. I used various approaches and techniques to refine the coding structure and allow me to develop a sharper focus on the big ideas that arose from the data.

When data collection ended and I had coded all raw data, I identified broad conceptual elements underlying the analytic codes and created themes to help make sense of the data as a whole and reveal answers to my research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saldaña (2016) suggested a process he called “codeweaving” (p. 276) as a way to investigate possible relationships between individual components that arise during analysis. As core categories or themes began to emerge from the data, I used various strategies to explore relationships between concepts, integrate the ideas, and derive overarching meanings or theories from the data (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). The process of extracting larger meanings from the data and using them to develop study-specific findings that relate to existing literature is known as *interpretation* (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). To ensure that my data could “bear the weight of [my] interpretation” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 37), I continually checked my biases and prejudices and created visual representations of my interpretations in the form of charts and diagrams (see Chapter 4) to clarify my thinking and make findings more accessible for readers (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Researcher Role**

Qualitative inquiry puts many demands upon researchers. To represent the experiences of others faithfully, researchers must spend considerable amounts of time
gathering data in the field, analyzing large quantities of data, working diligently to show complex and multiple perspectives of participants, and trying to be flexible as they work with emerging research designs, while also adhering to ethical research practices (Creswell, 2013). The challenge is to represent the experiences of others with verisimilitude even though the researcher does not have direct access to other people’s minds or experiences.

Addressing my reflexivity and positionality within this study was particularly important (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of working collaboratively to explore the sensitive topic of cultural identity produced some uncomfortable, contentious, and potentially upsetting experiences for participants, for me as the researcher, and for me as a participant and a leader in the CoP. Milner (2007) suggested that researchers who ignore issues of race and culture when designing a study face many dangers. To help education researchers become more conscious of their positionality and of the racial and cultural experiences of their study participants, he presented a framework. Milner (2007) recommended that researchers should think about themselves and how they relate to others involved in the study, and “acknowledge the multiple roles, identities, and positions that researchers and research participants bring to the research process” (p. 395). Since I was working with participants in a CoP to critically reflect on how our cultural identities relate to our teaching practice with diverse students, I was keenly aware of matters of race and culture among participants in the group, between teachers and their students, and between myself as a researcher and the other participants. Milner (2007) claimed that when researchers and participants engage in
collaborative reflection about issues of race and culture within the context of research, they open possibilities for equal representation of both researcher and participant perspectives. Hence, in my study, I intentionally focused on and encouraged inquiry into aspects of race and culture for myself as researcher and for the participants in the study.

During data collection, I took the stance of a learner who sought enlightenment from my participants. I worked to establish good rapport with participants to encourage honest sharing in group meetings, reflective journals, and interviews. Throughout this research project, I participated as a member of the CoP. In other words, I explored my cultural identity and reflected on my teaching practice along with my participants. I took on the role of participant as observer, which means that the other participants knew that I was conducting research, but during group activities, my focus was primarily on participation and secondarily on my role as a researcher (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following section addresses the implications of this dual role.

Dual Role as Researcher and Participant

Working within the dual role of researcher and participant presented several challenges, but it also provided some advantages (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000; Probst, 2016). Postmodern and feminist perspectives—particularly within the qualitative research tradition that acknowledges human experience as fluid, complex, and multilayered—have challenged traditional approaches to research that clearly separate researchers from participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Scholars have used the terms native, indigenous, and insider to describe researchers conducting studies about groups in which they are members (Kanuha, 2000), and they have argued that
taking the position of an insider can have positive and negative effects on a study. One of the benefits of being a member of the group is acceptance; participants are more likely to trust the researcher and may be more open and willing to share because they assume that the researcher understands their situation (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This can afford the researcher a greater depth of knowledge and insight into the topic. However, being an insider can also be problematic because researchers may experience conflicts between their obligation to conduct a trustworthy study and their loyalty to the group. Another potential issue is that participants may not fully explain their individual experiences because they think the researcher already understands their perspective because of their common backgrounds and shared membership in the group (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Qualitative researchers—insiders and outsiders—are an integral part of every study because they are the conduit through which data are gathered and analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When the researcher is also a participant in the study, the level of intimacy increases, so researchers must take precautions to mediate effects of their dual roles. Kanuha (2000) recommended three specific ways that an insider researcher can address these conflicts. First, any time respondents imply that the researcher already understands what they are saying, the researcher should ask them to clarify or elaborate. Second, when group members uniformly express similar ideas, the researcher should press for exceptions. Third, the researcher should constantly be aware of the tensions implicit in the researcher-researched relationship and intentionally explore the possibilities and limitations that lie within that relationship. I reminded myself to follow these steps throughout the study to ensure that my role as a member of the CoP
did not unduly influence my vision as a researcher. Conversely, I continuously needed to check that my role as researcher did not impede the free and open negotiation of meaning among the members of the group.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) claimed that the dichotomy of insider versus outsider positionality for researchers is overly simplistic, arguing that qualitative researchers regularly occupy “the space between” (p. 60) insider and outsider because they are invariably impacting the object of study to some degree. My challenge as a researcher and a participant was to “find a way to be both” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 62), since I conducted this study in which I was personally and professionally interested. This required that I maintain a heightened sense of awareness of my dual role, consistently document my biases in my research journal, and frequently clarify my understandings with participants. The following sections delineate the steps I took to accomplish this.

Power Dynamics in Professional Learning Communities

Since critical reflection is grounded in critical theory (Brookfield, 2016), it was imperative that I remained conscious “of the power relations inherent in the research act itself” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64). This issue was particularly important because the CoP was the primary unit of analysis in this study. Within this CoP, I was a participant, a leader who helped guide the group’s activities, and the researcher in charge of the overall project. Throughout the study, I had to be conscious of these multiple roles and take steps to ensure an equitable balance of power within the CoP because this is one of the features that distinguishes CoPs from professional learning communities.
The term *professional learning community* (PLC) is frequently used in the field of education to describe “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 11). According to Hord (2015), successful PLCs should include structural conditions that include sufficient time, resources, and data; relational conditions that foreground respect, trust, and mechanisms for conflict resolution to build a supportive community; shared vision, values, and purpose; focused, intentional, collaborative learning based on improving student learning; peer observations, critique, and support to improve practice; and shared leadership and decision making. Although PLCs share many features with Wenger’s (1998) CoPs, one distinguishing feature is the locus of power within the two groups. A culture of collaboration is present in both types of communities; however, PLCs lead to school improvement guided mostly by external leadership, and CoPs lead to improved practice guided by shared internal leadership (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007).

Research into the role of leadership in PLCs and CoPs reveals that power dynamics function in various ways. For example, in a study exploring the processes used to develop an effective professional learning community in an Australian elementary school, Maloney and Konza (2011) found that, despite efforts to create a PLC based on equity, respect, and collaboration, the project showed conflicting results. Some teachers fully engaged in the process of self-reflection and critique of practice and accepted a challenge to participate in action research to improve their practices, whereas others hesitated to participate, showed little willingness to discuss challenging topics, and
resisted changing their practice. Factors that affected meaningful engagement in self-reflection and contribution to group efforts were individuals’ perceptions of the value of the endeavor, their willingness to invest time and energy in accomplishing the goal, and the degree to which they felt all members were equitable participants.

Maloney and Konza (2011) noted several issues of power imbalance in the study. First, some teachers were reluctant to engage in conflict when more outspoken members of the group expressed differing opinions. Second, teachers were resistant to the top-down approach in which the school leader controlled the agenda for the PLC. Third, the presence of the outside researchers, who they perceived as experts, may have reduced teachers’ confidence in expressing differing opinions. Maloney and Konza (2011) concluded, “Professional learning within a professional learning community has a better chance of succeeding if teachers contribute as equals to setting the agenda, bringing about change, and ultimately improving their own practice” (p. 85). In other words, shifting the leadership from external to internal control can lead to more effective learning.

Another study examining the relationship of power, communication, and sensemaking within a CoP at a college in the United States showed that although CoPs do not have predetermined formal power structures, informal leaders often emerge from the group (Weaver et al., 2009). In this study, members of a science department met voluntarily once a week with the mission to improve undergraduate education, curriculum, and lab facilities. Two different types of leaders were apparent in the group. The sage was a high-ranking tenured professor and founding member of the group who was considered an expert because of his position within the school structure and history
of leadership in the CoP. The organizer, a recognized expert teacher and lab director in a tenure-ineligible position who coordinated meetings, was considered essential to the group’s successful functioning. Weaver et al. (2009) argued that within the informal context of CoPs, “traditional power dynamics may give way to collaborative and complementary power roles that, rather than compete for influence, mutually support and advance the goals of the organization” (p. 319). This research shows that experts of different kinds can work simultaneously within a CoP to help members improve their practice. These studies demonstrate the importance of leadership roles and power sharing within a group and show that these aspects of group interactions warrant special and careful attention.

Therefore, in this study, I took steps to ensure the sharing of authority among the members of the CoP, and I expressly invited participants to engage in decision making about group activities, discussions, and selecting topics for reflective journal writing. For example, I engaged participants in the decision making about meeting dates and times and encouraged them to develop activities for group reflection. I also used the Appreciative Pause technique to allow members time to acknowledge how others’ comments or questions facilitated new understandings for them (Brookfield, 2017).

Hord and Hirsh (2009) noted that it can be beneficial for group leaders to explain the difference between dialogue and discussion as two different modes of conversation. They described dialogue as members sharing their knowledge, feelings, or opinions and suggested it as “preferable when the goal of conversation is to help participants understand one another” (Hord & Hirsh, 2009, p. 23). On the other hand, when group
members want to make a case for taking a particular action or making a specific decision, discussion is more appropriate (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). By using these techniques and paying explicit attention to the role of power in the CoP, I tried to build trust among group members to allow for authentic sharing, ensure all voices could be heard, and manage conflict in respectful ways.

My Role in Collecting and Analyzing Data

Stake (1995) noted that qualitative researchers must continuously make decisions about what aspects of their role as researchers to emphasize at various points in a study. During group meetings, there were times when it was difficult for me to set aside my role as a researcher and fully engage as a member of the CoP. To help me focus as a participant, I tried to remind myself that I could embrace my role as researcher while transcribing the meetings and analyzing the resultant data.

During data analysis, researchers must make their best attempt at “getting it right” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 127), but they must also accept there is no static understanding of the world to grasp and hold. Over the course of this study, my understandings shifted and changed along with the ever-changing world of experience that I sought to understand (Wolcott, 1990). My multiple roles as researcher, participant, and leader in the CoP required that I acknowledge the effects my perspectives had on the analysis of data and that my analysis would affect me personally as a teacher and as a member of the CoP (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). My goal was to understand how my participants and I experienced the phenomenon of critical reflection on identity and how those experiences related to our work with CLD students.
Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p 16). Humans, unlike scientific instruments, are inherently biased. Researchers bring their own experiences, beliefs, fears, assumptions, and ambitions to their work. Similarly, participants bring their own subjectivities to the qualitative research experience. While some might see this confluence of subjectivity as a limitation, others see it as a strength (Lichtman, 2013; Wolcott, 1990). Lichtman (2013) argued that when researchers reveal themselves as subjective beings interacting with subjective participants, they are opening opportunities for greater understanding through the research process. Peshkin (1988) claimed that by consciously and systematically identifying and explaining aspects of our own subjectivity within the context of each research project, we can better manage how those influences affect what we, as researchers, observe, record, interpret, and write. Peshkin (1988) said, “Ones’ subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 17).

I would argue that subjectivity is more like our skin. It is who we think ourselves to be; it is how others see us; it gives us shape as we navigate the world of experience. A reflexive qualitative researcher must consider positionality—how the researcher is positioned with regards to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, insider/outsider status—and how power relations exist within the research dynamic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first step in becoming a reflexive researcher is to acknowledge the subjective skin in which one lives.
Like all researchers, I bring my own biases and life experiences to this research project. I am a middle-aged, White, middle-class woman who has taught in urban and suburban public schools in the southeastern United States for 15 years. Because political and philosophical orientations can influence views on cultural differences (Vavrus, 2012), I feel it is important to disclose my position as a critical multiculturalist who endeavors to challenge and question the legitimacy of the dominant culture’s power in educational settings and who recognizes the tensions inherent in multicultural societies. I acknowledge that my own experience working with CLD students sparked my interest in the topic of how teacher identity intersects with teaching practice. My own successes and struggles working in CLD schools have made me curious about how teachers understand their own identity and how it relates to their work with diverse students. It was a challenge for me to separate my own feelings about and desires to improve educational outcomes for CLD students from my work as a researcher. I trained myself to recognize and document how my personal reactions were interfering with or influencing my perspective as a researcher (Peshkin, 1988; Wolcott, 1990). It was my hope that “by monitoring myself, I [could] create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attune[d] me to where self and subject are intertwined” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20). That is the essence of this study that explores how identity is intertwined with practice. To facilitate self-monitoring, I recorded reflective memos to document my own subjectivity throughout the project (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Managing my subjectivity in this way allowed for authentic meaning to arise from my research less encumbered by my personal biases.
Trustworthiness

Because qualitative research is inherently subjective, validity and reliability are conceptualized differently than they are in quantitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Qualitative researchers should aim for trustworthiness, not truth (Riessman, 1993). Shenton (2004) suggested that qualitative researchers should use Guba’s (1981) four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility means that the research presents a realistic depiction of the phenomenon under study by utilizing triangulation strategies, soliciting peer review of the project, including thick description, and framing findings within existing literature. Transferability requires the researcher to disclose enough detail for the reader to determine if the findings of a study might apply in another setting. Dependability means that the researcher should provide sufficient information and methodological descriptions for others to duplicate the study. Confirmability requires the researcher to show that results came from the raw data, not from researcher biases or prejudices (Shenton, 2004).

For this research project, I employed multiple methods to enhance credibility. Triangulation and member checks are strategies that can improve the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Although the term triangulation can mean verification of facts in some contexts, in qualitative research it often refers to processes such as checking and comparing data gathered through multiple methods and from a variety of sources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using transcriptions of group meetings, participant
journals, interviews, field notes, and a variety of documents in this study allowed me to ensure that I was developing a rich picture of the experience participants had when examining their cultural identity in relation to their work with CLD students. For example, I used reflective journals and text messages to cross-check what participants shared in group meetings and interviews. I also used member checks to clarify understanding in the reflective journals, text messages, surveys, and interviews. By soliciting feedback from my participants on my interpretations of their comments and behaviors, I helped ensure that my codes, categories, and themes represent intended meanings not my misinterpretations (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also worked closely with my dissertation committee to receive constructive feedback about my methods, analysis, and writing.

To ensure transferability, I provided detailed accounts of the context for the study, as well as the research setting and participants. I also provided examples of all documents and instruments used by the researcher and the participants in the appendices. To address dependability and enable future researchers to replicate the study, I provided extensive details about the design and implementation procedures for the project. I explained the data collection methods and shared reflections on the effectiveness of my procedures (Shenton, 2004). I created an audit trail that provided step-by-step accounts of how I documented my subjectivities, collected data, developed coding categories, analyzed data, and made decisions as the research project progressed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This audit trail verifies that the findings emerged from the data rather than from
my own preconceived notions about how teachers experience critical reflection on identity and how they can use that reflection to improve their practice.

By using these strategies to improve the trustworthiness of this research project, I tried to develop a level of trust with my participants, with my readers, and with the scholarly community so that my findings may be accepted as part of the conversation about improving teacher practice with CLD students. Wenger (1998) described education as “an investment of a community in its own future, not as reproduction of the past through cultural transmission, but as the formation of new identities that can take its history of learning forward” (pp. 263-264). It is my hope that the teachers who participated in this researcher project will be able to take their learning forward, empower themselves to create new ways to address the needs of CLD students, and share their new understandings with the larger educational community.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the design and methodology for the study. I reviewed the purpose of this research, which was to explore what happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with CLD students. I reviewed the research questions for the study and provided a rationale for conducting a qualitative case study. A case study approach was most appropriate for this research because it allowed me to investigate how teachers can work within a CoP to reflect critically on their cultural identity and examine their beliefs about how that experience may affect their teaching
practice. The CoP was the bounded case for the study and the primary unit of analysis, and I examined the individual teachers as embedded cases.

I used purposeful sampling strategies to select the site and participants for the study. The site was a middle school with a significant number of CLD students, and I selected nine participants who showed interest in the topic under study, willingness to engage in the process of reflection, and possessed the ability to meet with the group and take part in the related activities.

I collected multiple forms of data that included observations of group meetings, documents for reflecting on identity, reflective journals, text messages, surveys, and interviews. I used NVivo software as a tool for managing, coding, and analyzing data. To explore, categorize, and make meaning from the data, I utilized a constant comparative approach to data analysis. After becoming familiar with the raw data, I used open coding for the initial passes and continued with more focused analytical coding techniques in later rounds. My goal was to create categories, integrate concepts, and eventually come to a meaningful and theoretical interpretation of the data as a whole.

In this study, I was a researcher and a participant and leader in the CoP. Occupying multiple roles in a study can have both positive and negative effects (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), so I had to address my subjectivity carefully as both an insider and an outsider as I collected and analyzed data over the course of the project. Acknowledging and reflecting on subjectivity is an integral part of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), so I used self-monitoring techniques and reflective memos to help prevent my biases and personal interest in improving educational outcomes for CLD students.
from unduly interfering with my research. I also employed Guba’s (1981) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to help ensure my study is trustworthy and of use to the scholarly community. Chapter 4 presents the results of this inquiry, and Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings, as well as implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore what happens when middle school (grades 6, 7, and 8) teachers engage in a Community of Practice (CoP) to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. The primary research question that guided this inquiry was:

1. What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities?

The following supporting questions helped guide the research and allowed me to explore teachers’ experiences in the CoP and their beliefs about how those experiences may affect their teaching practice.

2. How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with CLD students?

3. How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their practice with CLD students?

The preceding chapters provided information on the background of the problem, established a need for conducting research by presenting an overview of the existing literature, and described the methods used for data collection and analysis. This chapter presents the findings of the study and provides answers to the research questions.
The data showed that when teachers engaged in a CoP to examine their cultural identities, it resulted in a process that began with establishing initial conditions for a successful CoP, then led to involvement in the CoP and engagement in critical reflection. That experience prompted participants to develop an increased awareness of cultural differences and to undergo a range of transformations. Figure 5 provides a visual depiction of the process that emerged during this study and gives an overview of the organization of this chapter.

**Figure 5.** The process of teachers engaged in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities. The shaded boxes show Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging to a CoP—engagement, imagination, and alignment. The perforated circular arrows indicate that critical reflection was an ongoing and cyclical experience for participants in the CoP.
First is an explanation of how I worked with participants to establish the CoP. Next is a description of the members of the CoP and details of their participation and examples of how they demonstrated modes of belonging (Wenger, 1998) to the group. Following this are descriptions of how critical reflection transpired in the CoP and how that led to increased awareness of self, colleagues, students, and teaching practice. Also included are explanations of the types of transformations participants experienced during the study. Finally, I address the supporting research questions by showing how teachers experienced critical reflection and describing their beliefs about how their participation in the group may affect their teaching practice.

Initial Conditions for a Successful Community of Practice

CoPs are everywhere, and everyone belongs to many different and often overlapping CoPs (Wenger, 1998). The unit of analysis for this study was a CoP of teachers from one school. The members knew one another as colleagues and some as friends before the study began. Because this COP was formed explicitly for the purpose of this research, I paid special attention at the beginning of the study to creating conditions for an effective CoP. I selected participants who were willing and interested in exploring the topic of cultural identity, and I took steps to establish a safe and supportive space for social learning to happen.

Willing and Interested Participants

The participants in the study were teachers at Wood Valley Middle School (pseudonym) who worked with CLD students. They were open to exploring their own
cultural identity, willing to participate in a CoP, and amenable to sharing their beliefs about how the experience may affect their teaching practice. Their participation in the CoP and the resultant critical reflection was voluntary. Tables 3 and 4 provide information about the participants’ backgrounds and experience as teachers.

Table 3

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Languages*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominique DuVal</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>French (native speaker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi Baumgartner</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>German (native speaker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Turner**</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>Spanish (beginner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Patterson</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne Bishop</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh Tennison</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Reyes</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Spanish (native speaker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg Donovan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>Spanish (beginner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Skyland</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>Italian (beginner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah Abrams</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>Spanish (beginner)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *denotes languages other than English spoken at a fluency level; **denotes researcher.
## Table 4

*Participant Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Degrees/Certifications</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Environments</th>
<th>Subjects*</th>
<th>Levels**</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominique DuVal</td>
<td>BS psychology, MS healthcare administration, French and ESOL certified</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Private, public</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Early childhood, 6th-8th, adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi Baumgartner</td>
<td>BA German, MAT in middle grades science and math</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Turner***</td>
<td>BA English literature, MAT in secondary English, gifted and ESOL certified</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>English/language arts, ESOL</td>
<td>6th -8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Patterson</td>
<td>BA and Med education</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>English/language arts, humanities, special education</td>
<td>7th -9th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne Bishop</td>
<td>BA sociology, MAT in middle grades ELA/SS, MA Christian education, ESOL and gifted certified</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>English/language arts</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh Tennison</td>
<td>BS business, BA journalism, MAT middle grades ELA/SS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>English/language arts</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Reyes</td>
<td>BS clinical psychology, teaching and gifted certified</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Private, public</td>
<td>Human relationships, Spanish, English</td>
<td>6th -8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg Donovan</td>
<td>BA sociology, MNA (Masters of Nonprofit Administration), MAT middle grades ELA/SS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public, private</td>
<td>English/language arts, ethics, global issues, science</td>
<td>6th -8th, 12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Skyland</td>
<td>BS psychology, Med learning disabilities, EdS special education</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Public, international, charter</td>
<td>Special education all subjects, world geography, biology, literature</td>
<td>6th -8th, 9th, 11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah Abrams</td>
<td>BA speech communication, MAT in secondary English, gifted certified</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>English/language arts</td>
<td>7th, 8th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *denotes subjects taught in career as a teacher; **denotes grade levels taught in career as a teacher; ***denotes researcher.*
Brookfield (2017) cautioned against mandated critical reflection for teachers and suggested that reflecting on practice was more beneficial when done as a noncompulsory collaborative process than as a required individual activity. Participants agreed to participate in the study for various reasons, including having a prior interest in the topic of cultural diversity, seeing it as an opportunity to learn and grow, and having a previous relationship with the researcher.

Prior interest in cultural diversity. Many of the participants had previous experience exploring and reflecting on culture, identity, race, and diversity, and their interest in these topics made them eager to take part in the study. Most participants remembered having a course in multicultural education or culturally responsive pedagogy as part of their teacher preparation programs. A few teachers said they had attended Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (Echevarria et al., 2008) training as professional learning to help them improve their instructional practices for English learners. Several participants mentioned their prior interests when explaining why they agreed to be part of the study. Prior to the study, Dominique realized that student diversity was a factor she needed to consider as a teacher: “Last school year, I was trying to think about everything I do, think about the diversity component.”

Jayne acknowledged,

Because race and culture conversations have become more prevalent in my personal life, and because we teach in such a diverse school, I think I have hoped
to have more intimate and vulnerable conversations about race with coworkers, especially coworkers who are not White.

She recognized that collaboration with colleagues of different racial backgrounds would enhance her own efforts to examine the role of race and culture.

Meg indicated a desire to connect her passion for social justice more closely with her teaching career:

I’ve always sort of had a commitment to this idea of working towards justice and equity. And I recently . . . became a member of a Unitarian Universalist church. And so much of the work in the faith community there is really committed to social justice and all that . . . spurred me to . . . see if there are ways that I can incorporate that kind of work into my career and my daily work. . . . And so, then when we were talking [about] your study, I was sort of thinking like what a great way for me to start to think about how to incorporate these things that I find very valuable in my personal life into the work that I’m doing at school.

These remarks show that having an existing interest in diversity, culture, race, and social justice contributed to participants’ decisions to become part of this research project.

An opportunity to learn and grow. Participants also viewed their participation in the study as an opportunity to learn and grow personally and professionally. They viewed the CoP as an opportunity to exchange ideas with coworkers, expand their understandings of cultural diversity, as well as improve their practice. When asked why she joined the study, Serah responded, “I think I was just looking to, well, I’m always
looking to improve my understanding of myself and my students. And I feel that that overall makes me a better person and a better teacher.”

In a similar fashion, Jayne explained:

[I am] Always wanting to learn and improve. And you know, I think especially being a White teacher in a very diverse school, getting to have conversations that you don’t always get to have. I have a lot of thoughts and ideas and opinions, but I’m also White. And so being able to bounce off ideas about, you know, things that I think. Am I off base? Are there perspectives that I’m missing?

The desire to expand their knowledge about cultural differences and develop new understandings of themselves and others was an integral part of many participants’ decision to join the CoP.

Previous relationship with researcher. I have been a teacher at Wood Valley Middle School for 12 years, and I have developed many strong professional and personal relationships with the faculty and staff at the school. I knew all the participants at least as work acquaintances before the study began. During the year of the study, I co-taught with three of the participants—Serah, Jayne, and Leigh. I would also consider several of the participants to be my friends. Although some may view these preexisting relationships as potential limitations to my objectivity, I believe they helped create a sense of trust and respect between me as a researcher and the participants who agreed to engage in the intimate task of exploring cultural identity, bias, and difference.
When asked what made her want to be part of the study, Lucy stated, “I like you. First of all, I thought you were nice, and I wanted to help you.”

Leigh said, “I thought . . . you’re going to do this with integrity. I know that you professionally, I feel like . . . you don’t waste people’s time.”

Similarly, Nancy explained:

[I wanted] To be in what I felt was going to be a hopeful positive group of people talking about something that’s hugely important not just in our school but in the world and society today. And led by someone that I thought was professional enough to handle it.

These comments suggest that the participants trusted me as a professional and believed that our knowledge of each other and our existing relationships would provide a solid ground for establishing a CoP to engage in the challenging work of critical reflection on identity and teaching practice. Another condition essential to creating an effective CoP was establishing a safe environment for teachers to examine their own identity and critique their assumptions.

Establishing a Safe Space

Professional learning communities and CoPs are more successful when group norms are established and followed and when collaboration takes place within a collegial and supportive environment (Levine, 2011; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008). In the first meeting in this study, participants established norms that helped create a safe
and supportive space for sharing experiences, exploring identity, and critically examining assumptions and teaching practice.

Participant-generated norms. *Norms* are principles that group members follow and use “to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior” (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.f). When teachers engaged in collaborative learning generate and follow agreed-upon norms, it creates a supportive environment for risk-taking and change in practice (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008). With this in mind, participants in this study collectively generated the following group norms during the first meeting:

1. Confidentiality—What happens and what is said in this group stays in the group. Personal and private information about members should not be shared with other colleagues.
2. Time Keeping—Start on time and end on time.
3. Assumption of Good Will—We will assume that comments and questions by group member are not intended to be offensive or hurtful but are made with good intentions and an eagerness to learn.
4. Respect others’ points of view and be honest about our own.
5. Make an effort to create a safe space to speak our truths.

At each meeting participants reviewed these norms and had opportunities to revise and amend them; however, no one suggested changes after the first meeting.
These participant-generated norms helped establish a safe environment for teachers to engage in dialogue about their identities, ask questions of one another, and engage in critique of their teaching practices. In one meeting, Nancy declared, “I like getting to know you all better. It’s nice to have a safe trusting place.”

Similarly, Lucy wrote, “I like the way the dynamic works. We all have the opportunity to talk and express our feelings without being afraid that what we say will be shared with other people that don’t belong to the group.” Consistently following group norms that protected confidentiality, assumed good intentions by group members, promoted respect for differing points of view, and encouraged honesty helped create a CoP in which members felt safe. This explicit and intentional focus also created and environment that inspired intimacy.

Nelson et al. (2008) noted, “Collaborative inquiry involves risk-taking, and deliberately employing collaborative norms provides safe structures for engaging in this risky yet transformative process” (p. 1298). Participants in this study also took risks when discussing personal details from their lives and teaching practice; however, they felt comfortable doing so because the norms helped establish an environment of trust and respect in which productive collaboration was possible. Meg explained, “[I] felt like I could trust that the people involved would sort of respect [my] vulnerability and provide back some of their own and then also keep that conversation or keep those topics just to our small group.”

In one of her journals, Jasmine wrote,
Each participant’s honesty is respected and not judged; we listen with open minds, and we contribute to the discussion without criticizing the beliefs, feelings, and experiences of others. This positive interaction (even when all parties don’t agree) allows us to grow as teachers, as women, as people.

These comments suggest that when participants feel safe and respected within a collaborative group, they are more open to learning from and with other members and more receptive to personal and professional transformation.

Collegial and supportive environment. Levine and Marcus (2010) found that it is essential for teachers to engage in dialogue with their colleagues about the specifics of teaching and that doing so can result in improved practice. Participants in this research expressed similar ideas and attributed them to the collegial and supportive nature of our CoP. While discussing her difficulties critiquing her own practice, Dominique said, “You don’t know if you’re doing them right or you’re doing them wrong until somebody else brings your attention to it. So, it was good listening to other teachers. It’s a little bit like a support group.” She appreciated the support and perspectives offered by other members in the group and viewed the dialogue as beneficial to her practice.

Leigh also valued discussions because they afforded members “the opportunity to talk across grade levels about students we all know, the ability to share each of our methods of handling difficult situations, [and] the time to feel like we’re not isolated in our classrooms without support.” These remarks show that it was important to establish a
caring and collegial context for participants to feel comfortable engaging in critical reflection on identity and practice.

In this section, I described how I laid a foundation for a successful CoP by selecting willing and interested participants and establishing norms for safe and productive collaboration. In the following section, I provide a detailed account of how the CoP worked and the critical reflection it inspired.

Membership in the Community of Practice

The CoP in this study was comprised of 10 teachers from Wood Valley Middle School who were interested in examining their cultural identity, engaging in critical reflection, and exploring the influence of diversity on their teaching practice. In this section, I provide a detailed account of the participants as members in the CoP and how participants exhibited behaviors that were consistent with Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants except myself.

Over the course of the eight-week study, participants in this study came together and engaged in activities and dialogue that satisfied the essential conditions of membership proposed by Wenger (1998) and Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015). The following paragraphs provide information about each member of the CoP to create a richer picture of who they are and how they participated in this study. This information derives from their comments in meetings, group texts, reflective journals, and interviews. Identity statements, which are self-descriptions written at the end of the study, serve to introduce each participant in alphabetical order. Inclusion of the exact
words that participants used to describe themselves promotes incorporation of their voices and authentic versions of how they see themselves. A table for each participant summarizes her demographic and professional information.

In this study, I was both a participant and a researcher, positioned as both an insider and an outsider in the experience (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Because I was participating in the CoP alongside the other members, I believe I was afforded more trust, intimacy, and acceptance than an outside researcher may have been given. Because I was an active member of the CoP, I used first person pronouns in the following discussion of the group’s experience.

Dominique DuVal

I am a woman who was born in West Africa, precisely in Cote d’Ivoire, a beautiful place, and [I] now live in the United States. I am very competitive; however, I value and respect others. I love to travel, cook, read, socialize, help others, listen to all kinds of music, and dance. I am very curious, which is one of the reasons why I likes to visit places. I enjoy working with young people because they are the future. I love everything related to art and culture. Lastly, I love diversity in all its forms.
Table 5

*Dominique’s Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Professional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Subject Area*: French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: Ivory Coast</td>
<td>Grade Levels*: 6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 52</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 23</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *taught during the research period*

Dominique spoke frequently in face-to-face meetings, and participants recognized her comments as valuable because of her perspectives as a speaker of multiple languages and as an immigrant to the United States. From the beginning, she recognized the study as “an opportunity to put some misunderstandings about culture *[sic]* identity aside.” Dominique acknowledged that her experience in the CoP had an impact: “Coming to this group makes me question. It makes me ask myself a lot of questions.” She was a critically reflective teacher who continuously set new goals for improving herself personally and professionally. She believed that all teachers had access to the content and materials but building culturally responsive relationships with students was what made someone “a good teacher.”

Heidi Baumgartner

I am a 55-year-old wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt, and friend that values good relationships. I was born in Heidelberg, Germany, so English is my second language. My father is German, and my mother is American, so we have blended cultural practices. I am an athletic, caring, kind person that loves to be outdoors.
I enjoy gardening, reading, hiking, swimming, traveling and photography. I am worried about the state of our planet and believe that is why I am called to teach—to make a difference.

Table 6

*Heidi’s Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Subject Area*: Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age: 55</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 5.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *taught during the research period.*

Despite having limited participation in group meetings because she was out town on a field trip and frequently out sick, Heidi realized she had much to learn about cultural awareness and responsive teaching. She self-identified as “different” because she was born in Germany, and English was a second language for her. She stopped me in the halls several times to talk about connections she was making between our discussion topics and news stories and other professional learning communities in which she was involved. Acknowledging the impact of her experience in the CoP, Heidi explained, “Since I have been part of this group, my ‘senses have been heightened.’ Biases exist in every shape, color, and age. I am so excited to be more in tune to my students and the world around me.” This comment demonstrates she was developing a more complex view of identity and a better understanding of the ways in which assumptions impact teaching.
Janet Turner (the researcher)

I’m a 50-year-old, White, English-speaking woman who feels younger than my age. I’m bossy, creative, and curious. I love learning and challenging myself. I am a wife, daughter, sister, teacher, and friend who enjoys traveling, reading, exercising, cooking, and gardening. I believe there’s great beauty and love in our world.

Table 7

*Janet’s Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
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<td>Subject Area*: ESOL/English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Levels*: 6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 50</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *taught during the research period.*

In addition to being both a participant and a researcher in this study, I was also a leader in the CoP who, with the input of the other members, directed many of the reflective activities and helped guide our conversations. Being conscious of my multiple roles and my inherent power as the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I tried to let other members of the CoP talk more in meetings than I did. Participating in the CoP made me understand that teachers do not get enough opportunities to reflect on their own identities and those of their students, to ask questions about culture, or to learn from one another. I became more aware of the influence of Whiteness on my teaching practice,
and I realized that many aspects of teacher identity remain unexamined until they face challenge of some sort.

Jasmine Patterson

I am a 50-year-old “feisty” young-spirited Black woman. I am a mother, wife, granddaughter, sister, teacher, and friend. I value life and relationships. I enjoy shopping, traveling, reading, cooking, and entertaining. I am always interested in learning something new about people. I am a loving individual with high expectations of others. I believe that love always outweighs hate.

Table 8

**Jasmine’s Demographic and Professional Information**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Demographic Information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Subject Area*: English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 50</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *taught during the research period.*

Jasmine was a frequent contributor to group discussions. She asked questions of other participants and encouraged them to divulge more about their personal experiences. Several people said they saw a new side of Jasmine in this study—she was different than the person they had known only through professional interactions. After the first meeting, Jasmine started critiquing her own long-held beliefs about colorblindness and quickly adopted a new perspective on racial and cultural differences. She was able to
internalize the CoP discussions and begin to recognize her biases. She stated, “I was able to feel the biases or judgements that are placed on students and their families, and I was able to recognize that I am guilty of projecting the exact same biases or judgements on them.” By the end of the study, Jasmine experienced dramatic transformations to her views about cultural differences and its influence on teaching practice.

Jayne Bishop

I’m a 35-year-old, Caucasian wife, sister, daughter, and aunt. I am a Christ follower, a teacher, an outdoor enthusiast, who loves traveling, gardening, building, and spending time with friends and family. I am a to-do list person and an overachiever.

Table 9

Jayne’s Demographic and Professional Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Subject Area*: English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 35</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *taught during the research period.

Jayne admitted that she had become more race-conscious in the last few years: “I have entered lots of circles that have brought my Whiteness to the forefront of my mind. Through church, school, friend groups . . . , and ultimately marrying a man outside of my race.” Other participants thought Jayne was knowledgeable because she mentioned books she had read on race, and she was able to speak about diversity, socioeconomic
status, and cultural identity in more sophisticated ways than others with less knowledge and experience. She suggested that most teachers are unprepared to help diverse students grapple with issues of identity because teachers themselves have not had opportunities to critically reflect and explore their own biases. Jayne had a growth mindset and believed her participation in the CoP would help focus her efforts to become a more culturally competent teacher.

Leigh Tennison

I am a 57-year-old White mother, wife, and aging athlete trying to stay healthy—mentally, physically, and intellectually. I am a news junkie trying to stay optimistic in pessimistic times. I have a moral compass giving me strength as I try to be a positive force in my community.

Table 10

Leigh’s Demographic and Professional Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Subject area*: English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 57</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*taught during the research period.

Leigh was a reliable member of the group who attended all the meetings and submitted all the reflective journals. Throughout the study, she was often more focused on learning instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and content-related issues than on delving deeply into culture, identity, and diversity. She
acknowledged having little knowledge or experience with race and cultural differences, but she had an open mind and recognized that she could make small contributions to further group learning. The disconnect between White teachers and Black students and their parents was a recurring topic for Leigh, and she stated that she often relies on colleagues of color to intervene when she is having trouble with students of color. She confessed, “I continue to feel that I’m the ‘White lady’ to many students.” By the end of the study, Leigh expressed an increase in awareness of issues surrounding diversity and showed evidence of meaningful reflection.

Lucy Reyes

I’m a 49-year-old, Hispanic woman, I speak English and Spanish, and I go to mass every Sunday. Religion is an important part of my life and culture. Also, I’m a mom of a 15-year-old girl, and sometimes it’s hard for me to understand her, but I try. I am a widow, a daughter, and a sister. My entire family lives in Mexico, [and] I visit them twice a year. I enjoy going there because I love cooking and eating authentic Mexican food. I am a friendly person that loves traveling, and I believe that when I travel the world, I learn from other people. Customs, food, languages, and cultures are part of my life because of my origin. As a teacher, these are important concepts that I teach every day. I love learning new things that I can implement in my classroom. I am a very strict, bossy, and rigorous teacher with my students because I believe that challenging them will
help in their future to be more competitive outside the classroom. I enjoy competition.

Table 11

*Lucy’s Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic</td>
<td>Subject area*: Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: Mexico</td>
<td>Grade Levels*: 6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 49</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *taught during the research period.*

Lucy was a vocal member of the CoP. Other members appreciated her Latina perspective, and she was proud to speak from that stance. For example, she helped teachers understand how Hispanic discourse patterns are different than in English and how that can impact communication with parents. Lucy said that teaching culture was part of her job as a language teacher; however, prior to the study she did not recognize the influence her own cultural identity had on her practice. In her final journal entry, Lucy wrote, “The activities and discussions that I had in this group helped me to realize that my cultural identity is strong and present while I am teaching.” Throughout the study, she focused on how participating in the CoP could help her improve as a teacher. In the end, she made significant transformations in the way she relates to students and to her content materials.
Meg Donovan

I am a straight, White English-speaking woman in my late thirties. I am an ally, a committed friend, and a believer in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I have confidence in the power of relationships and the natural world, and I work for justice and equity in my community. I am an eternal student who loves new experiences in my life and my literature.

Table 12

*Meg’s Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity: White</td>
<td>Subject area*: English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 36</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *taught during the research period.

For Meg, participation in the CoP was an extension of a preexisting interest in social justice and equity in her life outside of school. She was a major contributor to discussions, and she wrote thoughtful reflections in her journals and in the group text thread. She claimed that being a teacher can raise your awareness of identity issues: “Since getting back into education and like thinking about these things in terms of how I teach, it’s made me think a lot more about how I identify myself.” Building relationships with like-minded colleagues was a powerful part of Meg’s experience in the CoP. As a new teacher, she felt empowered to continue having conversations about race and
difference and felt supported by her allies. Meg frequently mentioned making changes to her teaching practice throughout the study.

Nancy Skyland

I am a soul searching educated person who is curious and happy by nature. I am forever amused in observing others around me and how we all interact together and separately. I am a lover of life and people. I am a friend, and I am loyal. I am determined (which does mean, not just imply, stubborn). I am sometimes rebellious, though flexible, and excited about almost everything. I am a half-glass-full and fun lady who is eager to learn and do most anything that seems fun and extraordinary. I am a teacher, but more importantly and more frequently, I am a learner! I am a listener and caretaker (of my mom and all those that I love), a problem solver, an adventurer, and I am a major fan of this project.

Table 13

Nancy’s Demographic and Professional Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity: White</td>
<td>Subject Area*: Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 60</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*taught during the research period.

Despite being out of school for two weeks recovering from surgery, Nancy was a reliable member of the CoP and only missed two meetings. After overcoming some initial hesitation in discussing sensitive topics with her colleagues, she started talking
more in later meetings. Nancy often shared examples and stories from her own life and frequently asked other members for clarification about what they were sharing or what they were feeling. She often had a folksy wisdom to her comments. For example, in one journal she wrote,

I am reminded of how we are all seekers sharing the same space and even similar experiences, but silent in our passing of one another each day. I am almost overwhelmed with sadness that daily our time is not better spent sharing ideas and learning from one another.

This comment shows Nancy valued the relationships she was building with members of the CoP and appreciated the knowledge she was gaining through participation.

Serah Abrams

I am a mother, wife, daughter, sister, auntie, and friend. I am a spiritual being who seeks understanding in all things. I love connecting with people on deeper levels and feel that family is what is most important. I enjoy laughing, talking, hiking, traveling, and trying new foods.

Table 14

Serah’s Demographic and Professional Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Personal Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity: Black</td>
<td>Subject area*: English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth: U.S.A.</td>
<td>Grade Level*: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 38</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience: 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*taught during the research period.
Serah joined the CoP in week four because prior commitments prevented her from attending earlier meetings. She thought of herself as a naturally reflective person and appreciated the CoP as an opportunity to focus her reflection. She explained, “I typically reflect on a spiritual level, but . . . I was allowed to be more critical of myself . . . [and] how I may walk in the world in regards to culture, diversity, and identity.” Serah’s perspectives as a “Black, woman, queer, southern” person prompted the group to discuss the topics of heteronormativity and intersectionality. Despite attending only two of the six meetings and submitting only two journal entries, Serah “was thankful for the opportunity to explore [cultural identity] with others who see and experience the world differently” than she does.

The descriptions of participants in this section are meant to provide the reader with a brief introduction to each teacher in the study. Later in this chapter, I provide additional and more specific information about their engagement in the CoP, how they experienced critical reflection, their transformations, and their beliefs about how the experience may influence their teaching. Throughout the rest of this chapter, participants are referred to by their first names except in tables or when members of the CoP referred to them by last name in direct quotes.

Participation in the Community of Practice

Over the course of this study, participants examined their own identities, learned about and from one another, and developed new ways of understanding themselves, their colleagues, their students, and their teaching practice. The participants demonstrated
fluidity in their participation and engagement in the CoP; they also showed changes in their self-identification and in their identification by others as novices and experts within the group.

Prior Relationships

The CoP under study in this research was created for the purposes of exploring what happens when middle school teachers engage in reflection on their own cultural identity. As such, all members were “newcomers”; there were no “old-timers” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) because the group was established explicitly for the purpose of the study. However, before the research began, members did know one another within the context of the larger Wood Valley Middle School community and had prior relationships with each other within content area departments and grade levels, through co-teaching arrangements, and even as friends inside and outside of school in some cases.

Wood Valley Middle School was organized by grade levels and content area departments. Participants in the study who taught on the same grade level or in the same content area had more frequent contact with one another because they shared similar daily schedules and attended planning and department meetings together. Because of these structural arrangements within the school, some participants were more familiar with some members of the CoP than others. For example, Dominique and Lucy, who both taught world languages, worked across the hall from one another and frequently discussed students, shared instructional techniques, and had common planning times. Similarly, the eighth grade English language arts teachers—Jayne, Meg, and Nancy—
knew one another from weekly planning meetings and daily interactions surrounding content, activities, and schedules. As mentioned earlier, I co-taught with Leigh, Serah, and Jayne, so we had professional relationships and work friendships prior to the study.

Some members of the CoP considered themselves to be friends before the study began, and others knew each other only as work acquaintances. For example, Meg and Nancy knew each other through a different CoP surrounding a shared interest outside of the school prior to Meg joining the Wood Valley staff. Jayne explained that she and Heidi were friends who occasionally “spend time together outside of school”.

Leigh commented on her familiarity with the members of the CoP: “Most of them I had a very limited relationship with. Heidi is the exception. I’ve been friends with her for years. But [the other participants] . . . I couldn’t have told you much about any of them.” Leigh’s comment captured a sentiment expressed by several participants: They may have had a close relationship with one or two members of the CoP before the study, but they were generally unfamiliar with the others.

Building new connections with one another and developing relationships within the CoP was an important outcome of the study that is explained in more detail later in this chapter. However, participation in the study also affected preexisting relationships. As Jasmine said, “Despite the fact that we had close relationships prior to the study, there were layers of them that were peeled back with the discussions that we had, which enabled me to have an even deeper connection with them.” Jasmine recognized that her participation in the CoP allowed her to become even closer to people she already
considered friends. As Lave and Wenger (1991) noted, the social negotiation of meaning among members is a dynamic process and happens with members engaging at various levels in a CoP.

Levels of Participation

Wenger (1998) described participation in a CoP as a bidirectional phenomenon: “Participation in social communities shapes our experiences, and it also shapes those communities” (p. 56). Through their participation in this study, teachers as individuals experienced transformations, and participants’ collective involvement shaped the group itself. By attending meetings, joining discussions, sharing stories, and writing journals, members contributed to the development of the CoP as a whole and to the group’s collective learning. Table 15 provides an overview of which participants attended each meeting, who wrote reflections each week, and how many texts each person contributed to the group chat in WhatsApp. The following paragraphs offer descriptions of the teachers’ level of participation in the CoP as determined by their contributions, perceptions by others, and self-assessments.
Table 15

Participation in Community of Practice Meetings and Reflective Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meeting 1</th>
<th>Journal 1</th>
<th>Meeting 2</th>
<th>Journal 2</th>
<th>Meeting 3</th>
<th>Journal 3</th>
<th>Meeting 4</th>
<th>Journal 4</th>
<th>Guided Reflection Meeting 5</th>
<th>Journal 5</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Meeting 6</th>
<th>Journal 6</th>
<th># of Text Messages</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Janet*</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * denotes researcher; X = attended meeting, wrote journal, completed activity; – = did not attend meeting so did not write journal; N = attended meeting but did not write journal

During the second interview, I asked participants to describe their overall level of participation in the CoP as full participation, active member, occasional member, or peripheral member. Five members—Dominique, Jayne, Jasmine, Lucy, and Leigh—believed they participated fully in the group. Some members recognized attending all meetings, being thoughtful, and completing all written reflections as proof of full participation. For example, Leigh commented, “I felt obligated to attend every meeting, and I think I might have. When there was an assignment, I did them, and I gave it thought.”

Other members viewed full participation more as a matter of sharing their life experiences and attentively listening to those of others. Jasmine admitted, “I allowed
myself . . . to be vulnerable and to share intimate things about myself. . . . I was engaged when others were sharing, commenting, and participating in responses to their experiences.” In this way, participants viewed being fully present physically and emotionally as full participation in the CoP.

Three members—Heidi, Nancy, and Serah—viewed themselves as active members. These participants all missed one or more meetings and did not submit all the reflective writing journals. Heidi and Nancy were two of the three participants who contributed no messages to the group text thread. Nancy acknowledged that she did not talk as much in face-to-face meetings as some others, but she said, “I was thinking the entire time. That makes me probably feel more like a full participation, but because I wasn’t always speaking, but . . . I was constantly thinking.” She saw her level of mental engagement as being very high but recognized that others may not have seen her participation in the same way.

Despite joining the group late, Serah labeled her participation as active based on how she was implementing what she learned in the CoP in other contexts by “taking what I was hearing and learning in the in the group sessions and trying to apply them to my life in some sort of way”. Serah was able to make use of what she learned in the CoP and implement it in other aspects of her life; this made her participation feel significant.

Interestingly, Meg, one of the most vocal and frequently present members of the group described herself as somewhere between a full and active participant. She expressed a desire to “sit all day and have these conversations,” but said, “I had some
limitations because it was school, and I had other demands on my time that didn’t give me the chance to like really dive in headfirst the way I would have liked to.” Meg valued her experience in the CoP but felt her responsibilities as a teacher and commitments outside of work limited the time and energy that she had for participating at the level she desired.

Looking back at my own participation in the CoP, I realized that aside from my talk as the researcher directing the study activities, I did not say as much in meetings as I initially thought. I was conscious of the multiple roles I was playing—researcher, group leader, and participant. Although I feel I contributed in meaningful ways to the dialogue, I often resisted the urge to make a comment or share an example because I wanted to ensure that other members had time express themselves. Additionally, I did not want my perspectives as the researcher to be seen as more legitimate than those of the other participants. Nonetheless, I would rate my level of participation as full.

Even though some members attended only two meetings, wrote only one journal, or sent zero texts to the group thread, everyone perceived their level of participation to be at a high level. No one said they were an occasional or peripheral member of the CoP. In alignment with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) view that all levels of participation are legitimate, members of this CoP believed that their contributions to the group were recognizable as full or active participation. In addition to asking participants about how they perceived their level of participation, I also asked them to evaluate their level of knowledge about the topics of culture, identity, and diversity.
Levels of Expertise

Participants in the study expressed various levels of knowledge about the role of culture, identity, and diversity in their lives and the ways those topics relate to teaching. As mentioned in the earlier descriptions of participants, some members of the CoP were viewed as more knowledgeable about these topics than others. Several participants mentioned their appreciation for the insights Dominique and Lucy provided as immigrants to the United States and speakers of languages other than English. In an early journal, Nancy wrote,

I enjoyed listening and learning from Ms. Reyes sharing about the firmness with which one needs to speak to families of our Hispanic students in order to make things happen. I learned much from Madam DuVal sharing her history and personal feelings about her background.

Hearing the perspectives of people born outside of the United States helped the other participants understand that their own beliefs, assumptions, and values are not universal.

Similarly, White teachers valued the opportunity to hear from Black/African-American teachers about discrimination. For example, in my first journal I wrote, “Jasmine’s comments about discrimination within Black communities based on skin color and hair texture helped me understand that prejudices exist not only between different groups but also within the groups themselves.” Reflecting on comments made by a participant of a different race helped solidify my understanding of in-group prejudices.
Other participants were seen as more knowledgeable for having studied issues of race and social justice in other contexts. Participants valued Jayne’s comments about the work of Ruby Payne (2013) and the effects of class and socioeconomic status on education. Jasmine commented, “It was quite eye-opening when Jayne mentioned students having to come to school and ‘conform’ to the rules that govern the school—the ‘middle class’ rules.” Participants also recognized Meg as being well-versed in matters of diversity due to her involvement in a faith community that is committed to social justice and for bringing back resources to the group after attending a workshop on social justice education.

Some participants in the study admitted they were less knowledgeable. Heidi said, “Prior to our first meeting I considered myself to be culturally aware, but after the meeting I realized I am a novice in my cultural awareness.” After discussions with more knowledgeable colleagues, Heidi became more conscious of her own lack of expertise.

In a more striking example, Leigh reflected after the second meeting, I feel that others have more interesting insight than I do on these topics. Clearly, some have read and studied more about these issues, and, of course, others have lived and worked as a minority or outsider. I feel that I have more to learn from everyone else, and I have little more than the ability to share that I now know something I didn’t before. I hope that my open mind and willingness to discuss these issues will in a tiny way help the group.
Leigh’s comments are a clear admission of what Lave and Wenger (1991) would consider peripheral participation, feeling like a novice or an outsider and deferring to those with more expertise. In this case, Leigh admitted a lack of competence in the areas of culture, identity, and diversity; however, she still identified as a member of the CoP and recognized her potential to contribute to group learning in small ways. Despite being less knowledgeable about these topics, at the end of the study Leigh described her engagement in the CoP as “full participation” because she attended all the meetings and completed all the reflective journals. This indicates that she felt like a full-fledged member and suggests that her active involvement enabled her to overcome a perceived lack of knowledge about the topics under study in the group.

In the second interview, I asked participants to rate their level of knowledge about culture, identity, and diversity as it relates to teaching. They could choose expert, proficient, competent, advanced beginner, or novice. Table 16 shows participants’ responses to this question with comments supporting their choices and information about how they felt their level of knowledge changed over the course of the study.
Table 16

Participants’ Self-Assessment of Knowledge About Culture, Identity, and Diversity as It Relates to Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Knowledge Level</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Change over Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>Advanced Beginner</td>
<td>“I’m an advanced beginner because … you’re always learning something new.”</td>
<td>“Whenever I’m doing my lesson or my assignment that I need to consider a social [sic] economic status, the gender, all of that. … Before it didn’t come to my mind, but now I’m aware of it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>“I feel like I still need a lot more background. So definitely room for growth and improvement.”</td>
<td>“I feel like I have some better tools now, and I’m going to look [for professional learning opportunities] in the future.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>“I still feel just competent like before I probably was a novice.”</td>
<td>“The study has left me eager and open to learning more, even if I’m learning it just from my students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>“I am not an expert.”</td>
<td>“Being thoughtful” about how these issues relate to teaching practice helped her move up from competent to proficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Between Proficient and Competent</td>
<td>“I maybe thought I was more proficient than I really was beforehand.”</td>
<td>“You know, it just feels like conversations that we had made me think, oh, I don’t really know what I’m doing as much as or as well as I thought.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Reyes</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>“I feel I’m not an expert yet, but I feel like I’m proficient now.”</td>
<td>“And this summer I had the opportunity to think about what you told us and what we learn in the group, and I have bought new videos and have new ideas that I’m going to bring to my class in reference to the culture to diversity and identity.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>“I was maybe an advanced beginner with the desire to get better and to learn more. And then I feel like at the end, I would say that I probably was closer to competent.”</td>
<td>“I need some practice and I need some more knowledge and some more experience to get there.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Competent to Novice (based on context)</td>
<td>“I feel like because there’s so many cultures, so many identities, and so much diversity and it depends on which cultures you have in your class at a time.”</td>
<td>“I think you always learn something [when working cooperatively with others].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah</td>
<td>Between Advanced Beginner and Competent</td>
<td>“My knowledge of culture, identity, and diversity is constantly changing. And so, as it changes, then my approach to teaching changes.”</td>
<td>“Once you know better, hopefully you’ll do better.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All participants indicated that their experience in the CoP enhanced their level of knowledge about issues surrounding cultural competence as it relates to teaching. Teachers in this study showed an increase in knowledge and demonstrated an increased awareness of the impact of diversity on their practice. Their nuanced responses revealed an understanding of the complexity surrounding issues of culture, identity, and difference. Most participants talked about a continued quest to learn more and grow their practice to be more culturally responsive.

Modes of Belonging to a Community of Practice

Participants in this study exhibited behaviors that were consistent with Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging to a CoP—engagement, imagination, and alignment. Figure 6 illustrates how the three modes of belonging are interconnected and shows their manifestations in this study. The following sections present examples of how participants demonstrated the three modes of belonging and provide insights into the individual and collective experience of the CoP.
Figure 6. Modes of belonging to a CoP and their representation in this study.

Engagement. Engagement in a CoP is an active process. Members engage in activities; individuals work alone or together; they talk, use resources, and produce artifacts (Wenger, 1998; 2010). They are engaged in a common pursuit with other members (Wenger, 1998). In this study, the common pursuit was teachers engaging in critical reflection on their cultural identities and thinking about how their identities influence their teaching practice. This endeavor was a collaborative effort in which participants had opportunities to attend face-to-face group meetings, complete identity reflection activities, write reflective journals, and send messages to a group text thread. Engagement in the CoP resulted in participants relating stories of personal experiences,
developing interpersonal relationships, learning from each other, and creating new meanings.

Collaborating on reflective activities. During the eight-week study, there were six face-to-face meetings in which participants explored their identities and engaged in dialogue about culture, diversity, and teaching practice. As described in Chapter 3 and as part of their engagement in the CoP, members completed several activities: the Social Identity Wheel (LSA Inclusive Teaching, 2017a), the Teacher Beliefs Inventory: The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (Spanierman et al., 2011), the Diversity Profile (Stockton University, 2011), and a written identity statement. Participants indicated that these activities facilitated reflection and helped them develop a better understanding of themselves as cultural beings, the ways culture influences their interactions with other people, and the impact cultural identity has on their teaching practices. For example, after completing the Social Identity Wheel (LSA Inclusive Teaching, 2017a) and the Teacher Beliefs Inventory (Spanierman et al., 2011) in the first meeting, Heidi commented, “The two activities that we completed were eye opening. Not only did the activities make me think about my answers, but our discussion only further added to me questioning my ideas.” Participating in these collaborative activities pushed Heidi to see herself and others in new ways and to begin the difficult work of critically reflecting on her assumptions.

Engaging in these activities as a group gave participants time and space to reflect and expose contradictions in their beliefs about diversity in their lives. For example,
Lucy “loved” the exercise of writing her identity statement and said, “In our daily lives we are so busy with things that . . . we don’t stop and think about ourselves.” She appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to capture a version of herself in writing.

Serah generally resisted traditional identity categories, but she found that writing the identity statement gave her an opportunity to embrace aspects of herself that she values and honor them with a label: “So I don’t like labels. But then I felt like the labels, in this case, adding labels gave some value and importance to those roles that I have.” Both women appreciated the chance to think about who they are and capture the essence of that in writing.

The reflective activities also revealed contradictions between the way participants conceptualize diversity in their lives and how it was evidenced in the group exercises. As Jayne noted, many of the activities illuminated discrepancies “between what we believe to be true about ourselves and what is actually true.” Along the same lines, Meg observed, “I’m a whole lot less diverse than I perceive myself to be.”

The Diversity Profile, in particular, helped participants become more conscious of the ways that race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation shape our interactions in various environments and how we are, as Jayne said, often “more comfortable with likeness that we would like to admit.”

By engaging in these collaborative activities, members of the CoP developed an identity of participation that displayed their competencies, highlighted areas of inadequacy, and provided a venue in which to explore ways to improve their teaching
practice. Meg mentioned that she appreciated the opportunity to have both structured conversations and activities as well as more flexible free flowing discussions that allowed participants to contribute ideas and suggestions. Doing the activities, engaging in dialogue, and generating artifacts are vital experiences of participating in a CoP (Wenger, 2010). Participants in this study found value in the collaborative activities of the CoP and recognized them as important sources of engagement. Doing the work of engagement also involves sharing experiences, developing relationships, and creating meaning. In the following sections, I discuss these facets of engagement.

Relating stories and experiences. Another important component of engagement in a CoP is sharing personal stories and experiences. Wenger (1998) identified “community-building conversations” (p. 184) as a mechanism for mutual engagement. Much of the dialogue during face-to-face meetings involved members using personal experiences to make a point in group discussions or to corroborate something another member said. One example of this is the way that Dominique frequently used the phrase “where I come from” to introduce cultural differences between the Ivory Coast and the United States or to provide context for her experiences as an immigrant.

My country is a predominantly Black, but it’s a little bit like here in the United States. We have people from all kinds of nationalities everywhere. . . . But then I moved here. . . . Everybody wants to come to the United States. It’s an Eldorado. That’s where everything is. . . . So I’m here, you know. And I keep asking myself, am I really in the United State of America? Why, every time I’m
somewhere, I hear, “That’s a Black thing. That’s a White thing.”? You know, I
was shocked.

Dominique’s perspectives on race and ethnic differences generated much discussion in
group meetings and helped those of us born and raised in the United States see the issues
of race and ethnicity in new ways.

Lucy also employed stories to share her experiences translating for Spanish-
speaking parents at the school and her difficulties adapting her communication style to
that of English speakers. She told a story about a counselor asking her to help get proof
of residency form from a parent who had not responded to many previous requests. Lucy
explained,

“Let me get them straight,” that’s what I always say because we as Hispanics
operate in a certain way. In this country . . . it is so difficult for me because you
go “Sweety” [and] around bushes. . . . Spanish, it is a language that you go up
front and you tell how it is. In our language what you say is what you mean. . . .

In Spanish a person cannot be chubby or thick. In Spanish a person is fat.

[laughter] She is fat! We cannot say that in English. I don’t know why. I don’t
know why you call them thick, chubby, plumpy, fluffy. Whatever you say, it’s
fat.

When Lucy shared this humorous example, it generated an extensive conversation in the
group about difficulties that arise out of cultural and communication differences between
teachers, students, and parents. Her story helped members of the CoP reflect on
linguistic differences and discourse patterns, as well as be more conscious of the influence of culture and language on their interactions with students, colleagues, and parents.

There were also instances in which participants shared painful stories. Serah shared an experience from earlier in her teaching career about having to hide her sexual orientation at work. Serah fought back tears as she told about a special event one evening after school,

There were several of us . . . in same sex relationships, and we all wanted our partners [to come] . . . , and we went to one room. And that’s where our mates stayed the whole night. They came to the event, but we didn’t, we didn’t let our mates socialize. . . . They all went to one room, and the only people who knew we were all there were . . . our friends who were already a part of our lives. . . . Other people had their families here. We wanted our family here, but our families did not socialize.

This story about feeling forced to hide aspects of identity was a powerful reminder of the effects of heteronormativity in society. Serah’s story had an emotional impact on several members of the group and provided insight into her experience as a queer person in a conservative work environment. In sharing this story and others about being marginalized for her sexual orientation, Serah provided new insights for heterosexual members of the CoP and helped them understand different experiences.
Nancy was a consummate storyteller and frequently used personal narratives to express her experiences with issues of diversity. One story she told to the group was about her recently deceased father who had his leg amputated at the age of 89 and had to use a wheelchair.

My dad was one of the most active hard working people I knew. He could throw a cow over his shoulder the day before he had the leg amputated. I mean, like a strong man, and all of a sudden, he’s in a wheelchair. And it is absolutely amazing to me that [his disability was] visible but he became so invisible. I cannot tell you how many times I was with him and people would... immediately start talking to me and stop talking to him. . . . I learned that if I could, I’d always get a chair. If I could sit somebody next to him, they would talk to him eye to eye. But people would not talk to him looking down on him.

In sharing this story, Nancy helped further the group’s discussion of visible versus invisible identity traits. Her story also gave other members of the group insight into her love for her father and her efforts to protect his identity as a man deserving respect. Nancy’s story about her father also encouraged participants to share other accounts of when people were treated differently based on physical abilities.

The teachers also told stories about interactions with their students. Heidi shared a story about walking out to soccer practice one afternoon with three of her players. When they opened the door, they smelled grilled hamburgers from the concession stand. Heidi related the story this way:
I told the girls how much I liked the smell of burgers on the grill. One of the girls said, “I didn’t think you ate meat.” I said, “I don’t, but I still like to smell it.” I went on to say that I eat chicken and fish occasionally. One of the girls said, “I don’t like chicken.” The other two girls said, “Wait! What? You don’t like chicken? You are not Black.” I asked what that was supposed to mean. They said, “All Black people like chicken!” The same girl that didn’t like chicken said, “I don’t like hot sauce and . . . I like boojee ice cream.” . . . The girls were dying laughing and said, “Girl you really aren’t Black!” I said, “Whoa—just ’cause people do or do not like certain foods does not mean that they do or do not belong to a certain ethnicity.” The girls told me I didn’t understand.

This personal anecdote shows how individuals can oversimplify and misuse matters of race to label others. During the study, Heidi talked about being “more in tune to the comments” her students make about race and other cultural differences. This story shows that her students were comfortable having this type of conversation around her and that Heidi was being reflective about her interactions with students and conscious of their ideas about race.

Another trend in group discussions was to support another member by sharing a similar experience. Participants frequently responded to one another’s tales of personal experience with phrases like “I have a similar situation,” “I remember a time,” “I feel the same way,” or “I have had the same problem”. For example, after Jasmine shared a story about losing respect for some close friends after learning more about their political views,
Meg replied, “I feel the same. I have friends that I also lost or friends that I have had to change the way that I think about them because [of the] election campaign.”

One of many other examples happened during a discussion about establishing classroom procedures and student expectations. After Jasmine shared a personal experience, Nancy replied, “Jasmine, that’s typically how I’ve been through the years”. Nancy recognized that she and Jasmine shared similar approaches to starting the school year and setting expectations for students.

Lave and Wenger (1991) spoke of storytelling as a tool for communal discourse that enables members of a CoP to talk about practice and within practice. Narratives enable people to recognize universal aspects of the human experience and help create bonds of commonality. In this study, participants used story telling as a mechanism for exploring their own experiences with identity and as a way to share their experiences with other members of the CoP. They also supported one another by echoing similar experiences.

Developing interpersonal relationships. Engagement in CoPs can result in “tight nodes of interpersonal relationships” (Wenger, 1998, p. 76). Such was the case for people involved in this study. After just two meetings, Meg disclosed, “I already feel like we have begun to build a community. I’m feeling more comfortable in our conversations with our group, and I’ve continued some of the conversations after the Tuesday sessions.” As a new teacher Meg found comfort and companionship in the CoP and was able to continue discussions of identity and culture with other participants outside of
group meeting times. A few weeks later, Meg expressed even more gratitude for the relationships she was developing with other members of the CoP:

I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to get to know the other members of our group a little more deeply. I feel like we have a little secret society of people who are doing this work that is necessary but seems a little subversive. Almost like we need some sort of secret greeting or handshake.

This statement provides evidence that over the course of the study the relationships among group members were growing stronger and the members were developing a sense of camaraderie. Lucy explicitly stated that the CoP was responsible for helping her develop new relationships with colleagues that she barely knew before. She observed, “It’s like it created relationships because it seems like we know about each other’s culture, about each other’s points of view, of relationships, and many things that we talked about in the [meetings]. That was important for us.” The CoP provided a space for participants to spend time together sharing intimate aspects of their lives that they might not have under normal circumstances as coworkers. This intimacy helped cultivate relationships that extended beyond the level of friendly coworker.

In her final reflective journal, Jasmine eloquently explained the impact of the connections she made while participating in the CoP:

This experience allowed me to see just how well a diverse group could work together if there were opportunities for us to really become acquainted and connect personally. Having that connection springboards you into a successful
professional relationship . . . a relationship that begins with a mutual level of respect for one another because you feel like you “know” each other. You don’t feel like you’re coming together to work with a “stranger” to reach a common goal; there is a “relationship” there. This was evident to me when I found myself comfortable having conversations with those in the focus group when I ran across them in other areas of the building. Prior to our weekly meetings, a pleasant smile or the nod of my head seemed to be a sufficient greeting.

Jasmine and several other participants said their experience in the CoP allowed them to move beyond the casual pleasantries and acquaintance stage with this group of coworkers and develop deeper connections with them. The collegial and supportive environment we established in our CoP created an atmosphere of trust and openness in which participants were able to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships. Learning about each other and from one another helped these relationships grow.

Learning about and from one another. It takes more to create a CoP than having the same job and attending meetings together; it is essential that the members learn from each other (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). When participants in this study engaged in activities and discussion to explore their own cultural identity, they were doing so within the context of a social community. In the process of reflecting on their own identity and culture, they interacted with other members of the CoP—listening, talking, sharing, questioning, and critiquing. According to social learning theory, this type of active social participation is a form of learning and knowing (Wenger, 1998). In
this study the process of learning about ourselves within the context of a CoP also resulted in learning about and from each other.

Participants valued getting to know one another and learn about each other’s lives and perspectives. Lucy described her participation in the CoP as a “good opportunity to grow, to connect with others, and to learn.”

Nancy summarized some of the things she learned about other members in an early journal entry:

It is great how people are opening up and sharing experiences. Jayne with her readings trying to understand her new family, environment, and students. Ms. Patterson trying to resolve feelings of a long-term friendship that has disappointed. Meg coming to terms with her adult self vs. being a daughter.

Madam DuVal continuously adapting and readapting to a country that she gives so much of herself and talents to.

Nancy’s reflection on what other group members shared about their lives shows that she valued the opportunity to learn about these women and gained insights into their lived experiences.

Jasmine talked about how nice she thought it was “to be able to sit down and be transparent” and to have “your colleagues walk through your life with you”. During the study she allowed herself “to be vulnerable and to share intimate things”, and she appreciated when others in the group did so as well. In using the metaphor of walking through life together with others in the group, Jasmine implies that learning about one
another within the context of the CoP was an intimate experience. She admitted that we frequently know little about the people we work with: “Often we stand outside of someone’s life, and we look in, and . . . put the puzzle pieces together to figure out what’s going on with this person.” She appreciated being able to learn about other members’ lives, practices, beliefs, and cultures directly from them “as opposed to sitting back, just wondering.” Jasmine valued the CoP experience because she was able to learn directly from the other members rather than make her own inferences about them from afar.

Members in the CoP also learned from one another. During the first meeting, we discussed different terminology used to describe aspects of identity such as gender and sex or race and ethnicity. While completing the Social Identity Wheel, the following interaction occurred.

Leigh: How do you differentiate between gender and sex?
Lucy: I wrote the same thing.
Janet: So, gender is . . . Well let’s start with sex. They use the term sex, at least in what I read, to talk about your physical being, your DNA, your genitalia sort of identified at birth. And then gender becomes more of a socially constructed thing that you identify as male or female, or somewhere in between, or neither. So gender would be more of a social . .
Meg: Social?
Janet: Yes, a way to say it, social expression of the way you understand yourself.
Group: [simultaneous verbal expressions of agreement and understanding].
Heidi: And sex is science.

Janet: Sex is science. Oh, that’s a good way to remember it—sex, science.

This exchange shows how the group worked together to understand the distinctions between the terms gender and sex and came to mutually accepted definitions of the terms to use in our CoP.

Participants also shared knowledge gained from previous learning with one another. During one meeting, Jayne explained what she had learned recently about the fabrication of the construct of race to justify slavery. In another meeting, Jayne discussed class differences and how sometimes issues commonly identified as racial matters really have more to do with socioeconomic status. Referencing the work of Ruby Payne (2013), she described how many students frequently find themselves in trouble at school because they struggle “to operate in this middle class setting by middle class rules” because the rules they live by in their homes and neighborhoods may be very different than those they are expected to follow in school. Jayne’s contributions of knowledge gained from her own reading enriched group discussions and helped other members learn new ways of thinking about race and class differences.

During our group meetings, members also exchanged practical strategies for building relationships with students and managing diversity in the classroom. Leigh said that she found great value in having “the opportunity to talk across grade levels about students we all know [and] the ability to share each of our methods of handling difficult situations”.
One topic discussed frequently in the group was different techniques for making personal connections with students. Dominique told the group about a routine she used on Fridays after students completed the day’s lesson. She called the activity “What’s your issue?” Dominique set aside time for students to talk about what was on their mind and ask questions. The other teachers loved Dominique’s strategy for intentionally setting aside instructional time to let students express themselves, grapple with nonacademic problems, and get to know their teacher in a more personal way. Members of the CoP were able to expand their repertoire of strategies for building strong relationships with students by learning from one another.

Wenger (1998) described learning as “an interplay of experience and competence” (p. 50). While engaged in the CoP, participants shared their life experiences and knowledge of teaching with one another. Group discussions frequently layered personal anecdotes from our lives outside of school with stories of classroom experiences and more formal accounts of pedagogical practice. Learning transpired through the interactions of more competent or experienced members with those who had less competence or experience in a particular area. This was a dynamic process in which the roles of expert and novice constantly changed based on the topic under discussion. In this way, engagement in the CoP provided opportunities for all members to learn and make new meaning for themselves.

Creating new meaning in practice. People who participate in a CoP help one another develop new meaning through their collective experience (Wenger, 1998).
During their eight weeks together, participants developed new understandings of themselves, of cultural identity, and of their teaching practices. For example, over the course of the study, Lucy realized the extent of her parents’ influence on her own identity: “I’m a product of my parents. So that’s what I just realized. And, oh my gosh!” Later in her journal she reflected on that revelation: “To know this information is important because as a teacher it helps me understand that when my students lack the parental support, resources, and advice that I had growing up, their choices are impacted as well.” The process of exploring her own identity within the CoP facilitated a new understanding of herself and created a new frame of reference for understanding the experiences of her students.

Members of the group had different understandings of the term *ethnicity*. Several members of the group identified religion, specifically Catholicism, as a factor they considered to be part of their cultural background and ethnicity. For instance, speaking of her Irish Catholic upbringing, Meg said, “My religious and spiritual affiliation and my ethnicity are really closely tied together”.

Dominique, on the other hand, held a very different view. She explained, “My husband and I, even though we are from the Ivory Coast, we are not from the same ethnic group. I’m from the North. He’s from the West. So, it’s different. It doesn’t have anything to do with religion.” She claimed that ethnicity had more to do with “the language you speak and the traditions that you have. Like what you call the culture. Even the food that you are eating”.

Later Meg acknowledged that Dominique’s views on the matter provided new insights for her on ethnicity:

I really appreciated what you [pointing to Dominique] were saying about how you don’t see religion and ethnicity as even remotely related. That they’re sort of like two independent things, because that’s so different from the way that I grew up.

That’s interesting to think about.

Meg appreciated Dominique’s perspective and incorporated it into a new meaning of the term ethnicity. Dominique, however, remained insistent that her view was the right one. This discussion is an example of how through social interactions within a CoP, members can choose to create new meaning or choose to hold onto their prior beliefs.

Participants in this CoP also created new meanings for use in their teaching practice. Lucy came to appreciate the influence of her own cultural identity on her teaching. After the second meeting, she wrote the following in her journal:

My cultural identity does affect the classroom and learning environment. The discussions in the group have helped me to be aware of it. To improve myself as a teacher, I have to know more about my beliefs, biases, and culture. The more I know about my own culture and heritage the better I can appreciate other people’s heritage specifically my students. This will definitely affect my teaching effectiveness in a positive way.

Lucy’s participation in the group helped her realize the impact her own cultural heritage has on the pedagogical choices she makes, and she acknowledged that being more
cognizant of students’ cultural backgrounds may improve her practice. This was a new understanding for Lucy.

Jasmine became aware of the negative effects of her colorblind approach to teaching. In the first interview she elucidated the new perspective she developed while participating in the CoP:

Not seeing [students’ cultural identities], while I thought not seeing their differences, while I thought that was my way of being unbiased, it wasn’t because I was evaluating them, and I was treating them like they were everybody else. And they’re not like everybody else, just like I’m not. Everyone’s not like everybody else. . . . This focus group helped me to see that in my students. It helped me to recognize the differences as opposed to trying to just make everybody like the same. . . . [It’s] the differences that make them individuals, and those differences have such a huge impact on learning.

Jasmine experienced a tremendous revelation. She claimed to have taken a colorblind approach to teaching for more than 20 years, but during this study, through the process of social learning, she came to understand that as a disservice to her students. In the future, she vowed to pay more attention to student differences and “make concerted efforts to know not the shell of [students], but the core of them”. This shows intention on her part to change her approach based on the new understandings she developed in the CoP.

Engagement in this CoP resulted in participants creating new understandings of the role cultural identity plays in their lives and teaching practice. They interpreted their
interactions with others in the group as meaningful. Through reflection and dialogue, they negotiated new perspectives of themselves, of ethnicity, of their students, and of their pedagogical practice. Wenger (1998) claimed, “Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world” (p. 54). Participants were able to derive new meaning from their active engagement with other members of the CoP and through critical reflection on their lived experience.

Teachers in this CoP demonstrated engagement when they attended face-to-face meetings, participated in activities that inspired reflection on identity and culture, and shared their personal experiences. More specifically, participants developed interpersonal relationships with one another, they learned not only about one another but also from one another, and they were able to generate new meanings from the experience. Over the eight-week study period, teachers invested time and spent energy sharing experiences and information, exchanging ideas and opinions, critically reflecting on their biases and assumptions, and influencing one another’s beliefs and understandings of cultural identity and its influence on the work of teachers. In addition to active engagement, participants also demonstrated the other two modes of belonging to a CoP: imagination and alignment.

Imagination. In this study, participants demonstrated many aspects of what Wenger (1998) described as “the work of imagination” (p. 185). For example, teachers recognized themselves in the stories of others and began seeing themselves and others in new ways based on what they experienced in the CoP. This section provides illustrations
of how participants created new understandings of the role of culture, identity, and diversity in their teaching practice and how they imagined new possibilities for themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

*Recognizing your experience in others’ stories.* Imagination comes into play when people recognize elements of their own experience in stories told by others (Wenger, 1998). This process involves envisioning the experience of another person and discerning a thematic connection with one’s own life. When participants in this study told stories, other members of the group frequently responded by saying, “I have a similar situation” or “something like that happened to me”. These connections helped create a feeling of communal engagement in the CoP and a universality of experience that cut across differences in race, age, and heritage among its members.

Jasmine was able to recognize herself in a story told by Dominique about how her family resisted her marriage to a man from another ethnic group in the Ivory Coast. Jasmine said, “When Dominique shared the division that existed between the different parts of her country, I could totally relate because that same type of division exists in my hometown of New Orleans and in my family.” She went on to talk about how people discriminate against one another based on hair texture or skin tone within African-American communities.

In another example, Dominique shared a story about an African-American parent accusing her of being racist during a phone call about a student’s behavior. The parent did not realize she was a Black African. Dominique’s story prompted Heidi to talk about
her own experience of having one’s identity misinterpreted. Heidi explained that many times when she tells her students she was born outside the United States and she starts speaking her first language, they change their identification of her even though outwardly she looks like an “American” Caucasian.

Heidi: I start speaking German in class, and now I’m not White anymore.

Dominique: Yeah, now you are foreign.

Heidi: Yes, I’m not White. I’m German.

Dominique: And they tell me. They say, oh, you know Ms. Baumgartner, she is [German]. I say, “Oh Okay.” So they put us in the same box.

This exchange shows how Heidi connected with Dominique’s experience of having her identity misunderstood. It also shows that despite their differences, the two women share the experience of students or parents considering them an outsider.

The composition of families was a thread that helped weave together several stories in the fourth meeting of the CoP. It began when Leigh mentioned that she was often confused when students used the term *cousins* to mean something other than the child of one’s aunt or uncle. After that, I asked the group to think about the issue of family size and composition, “What is family? Who decides that?” This prompted Jasmine to share a story about how many years ago she and her husband welcomed into their lives a student neglected by her own family. After failed attempts to adopt the girl, they decided they were “just going to love her anyway”, and she has been a member of their family ever since. Jasmine elaborated,
So sometimes we find ourselves explaining how the mother-daughter, father-daughter relationship came to be, but it is real for us. So, I totally get when some of these kids think that so-and-so is their cousin or so-and-so is like a sister because Lana is ours.

Jasmine’s story prompted Nancy to discuss how she remains close to an ex-boyfriend’s family and how they stay with her when they visit from overseas instead of with him. And this resulted in Dominique explaining how her extended family of 23 came to be: “We are brothers and sisters. We grew up together and that’s how we communicate, but we can’t explain it to people because they judge us.” In this discussion members of the CoP encountered several different versions of what families can look like. These interrelated stories helped members of the CoP to imagine new situations in which familial love could take different shapes than the ones with which they were already familiar. Nancy identified the human need to categorize and label people, “We all have this need to understand. Who are these people to you?”

After the meeting, Jasmine reflected in her journal on how this particular discussion impacted her, “I was able to feel the biases or judgements that are placed on students and their families, and I was able to recognize that I am guilty of projecting the exact same biases or judgements on them.” Through the power of story and the exercise of imagination, participants in this group developed deeper understandings of what family can mean, recognized their own biases about family structures, and developed more inclusive perspectives.
Seeing ourselves in new ways. Over the course of this study, teachers began to see themselves in new ways. Nancy, who described herself as a naturally observant person, said, “I totally love observing the interactions [between members of the CoP]. It makes me think about things I do in my class and also how my students may or may not view me.” Her experience in the CoP provided her an opportunity to imagine what her students think about her and how they might interpret her words and actions in the classroom.

Jasmine talked about developing more empathy for students who face struggles at home. She admitted, “We don’t know what these kids come from.” Jasmine spoke of herself as a teacher who would dedicate more time and energy to building relationships with students as a means of supporting them in school.

Meg mentioned developing a greater awareness of gender diversity and consciousness of how her words and behaviors may offend others:

I’ve started training myself to ask questions about preferred gender pronouns and to move away from gendered language when possible. But there are so many forms of diversity that I don’t even know if I’m aware of when I might be offending someone.

Meg saw herself as a person who was sensitive to issues of diversity, and she recognized that developing cultural competency is a lengthy and ongoing process.

Of the 10 participants in this study, six of us, including me the researcher, identified as White. The subject of Whiteness and its influence on working with students
of color was a frequent topic of discussion and reflection. Jayne explained how she appreciated the perspectives of teachers of color in the CoP. She said, “There’s always part of me that’s like, ‘I’m White. I don’t know. Ugh, I think this is right. I think this is what’s happening.’” Jayne valued the opportunity to talk with teachers who could affirm or deny her theories about observations she was making of students from other races. Participating in this CoP helped White teachers to better understand the role of race in their practice and conceptualize ways to improve relationships with students who are racially or ethnically different than they are.

For example, Leigh recognized that “we White teachers struggle to make connections to our non-White students . . . [and] it becomes critical that students connect with us; therefore, we need to find ways to show more of ourselves so that students can see themselves in us.” Leigh began to understand that she could overcome some of the racial barriers that separate her from her students by sharing more of her life with them and finding areas of commonality around which to build stronger relationships. She also acknowledged that it is a teacher’s responsibility to find ways to connect with students from different backgrounds.

I also gained new insights into the influence of race on my teaching practice. In one of my reflective journals, I wrote,

As a White teacher, my race plays a huge role in teaching students of color. I think it creates a barrier between me and many African-American students that puts us at perceived cross purposes at times. I am trying to convince them of the
value of education and the many ways it can enhance their lives, while they are
distrustful of my message because they see no evidence in their lives or in their families that what I say is true. By contrast, I feel like my international students see my Whiteness in a different way. They see me as a resource for developing their own understanding of how school and life works in this country.

Participating in conversations about race with a diverse group of teachers helped me see the influence of my own racial identity from various perspectives. I was able to see my Whiteness as a barrier in certain circumstances and as an asset in others. This increased awareness helped me develop new understandings of myself as a teacher and better appreciate the multifaceted nature of my own identity as well as those of my colleagues and students.

Participants in this study were able to imagine themselves interacting with the world and people around them in new ways. The CoP provided a venue for exploring new possibilities in their lives and teaching practice. It also opened their eyes to new perspectives.

*Opening to new perspectives.* The teachers in this study appreciated the CoP as a place for sharing their own ideas and also as a venue for hearing different points of view. Jayne noted, “It was good to hear other people’s perspectives. Just to affirm things that you thought and or challenge” your own views.

Similarly, Dominique said, having discussions with coworkers who possessed “different views and cultural identities, makes me pay more attention to issues I did not
notice before”. She acknowledged the value of her experience in the CoP and said, “Talking to you guys, you open my eyes.” Several other participants spoke of similar “eye opening” moments they experienced during the study. They claimed these moments made them aware of new perspectives and helped them envision new possibilities in their lives and teaching practices.

Lucy acknowledged how her experience in the group made her appreciate the diversity of her colleagues and value the new relationships she had developed with them. From there she was able to imagine how beneficial similar opportunities would be for her students:

So, if those connections are with us, the adults, I can imagine with the students when they are sharing their personal, you know, lives and celebrations. Like, I can think how nice it is that they understand each other; they appreciate culture; they appreciate diversity. If we do, as adults, I can imagine how beneficial it is for the students to do that. And to learn that and express that. They can be, they are, more tolerant of each other, and they are more caring, and they know more about their friends or their classmates.

Lucy saw the value she derived from discussing culture and identity with other teachers and recognized how similar experiences would be advantageous for students as well.

From her experience in the CoP, Jasmine identified the potential for improving relationships among coworkers:
Just like students, we bring our differences to the classroom and to the team of teachers with whom we work. Just like we should consider the differences of our students as we plan lessons for them, we should consider the differences among colleagues as we interact with them daily. If we all became a little more empathic with those that are different, what a huge impact that would have on our relationships and our productivity.

Jasmine’s increasing awareness of the complexities of cultural difference made her realize the extent to which it influences her relationships with colleagues. She was able to imagine a workplace in which people are more knowledgeable of and considerate of individual differences.

In another example, Meg empathized with Serah, who shared the pain she experiences as a queer person who is forced to endure the “hurt [and] judgment of coming out” over and over again. Meg said,

I don’t have this experience, but I can only imagine that it would be hard to always be the trailblazer. To always be the one defending yourself and always be the one who’s having to say like, “No, I deserve to be able to have these things that other people [have].” Like that that would be exhausting.

In imaging life from Serah’s perspective, Meg connected emotionally with an experience very differently from her own. Verbalizing her thoughts also helped contextualize Serah’s experience for other members of the group. This example shows how imagination can provide members of a CoP with new perspectives and insights.
Within the contexts of participating in a CoP, Wenger (1998) claimed, “Imagination requires an opening. It needs the willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations” (p. 185). The teachers in this study participated willingly and with a desire to learn and investigate their own cultural identities. When provided with a safe environment to take risks and time to build relationships with each other, they shared openly and deeply. Nancy captured this when she spoke of teachers being able to critique the society they live in and seeing themselves as agents of change. Participants in this CoP were able to engage their imaginations in ways that created new possibilities for themselves, their students, and society.

Alignment. As a mode of belonging to a CoP, alignment means connecting the work of the local CoP to bigger enterprises (Wenger, 1998). Participants in this study experienced alignment in several ways. They expressed a need for all teachers to have similar opportunities to explore cultural identity and develop relationships with coworkers, they wanted the CoP to continue in some form after the study was over, and they looked for new opportunities to continue the work we started.

Extending opportunity to others. Their participation in the CoP inspired teachers in this study, and they wanted to grow the enterprise to include more people. Throughout the study, participants suggested that the entire staff of Wood Valley Middle School would benefit from participating in group discussions about diversity such as those conducted as part of this research. Leigh declared, “If I ruled the world (or school), I
would create [these] type of discussion communities as a mandatory/scheduled expectation.” She saw value in the work the CoP was doing and believed others would benefit from similar experiences. Nancy wondered about including school leaders in discussions about diversity. She thought it would be useful for administrators to reflect on the ways their biases impact their decisions. She realized that reflecting on her own identity and biases made her more conscious of her interactions with students, and she recognized the potential for leaders to engage in the same scrutiny of their beliefs and behaviors.

Participants also believed that providing more structured opportunities for coworkers to build relationships with one another would be beneficial for the school community. Acknowledging that many coworkers know little about one another, Heidi argued that learning about each other would encourage “team building” and help create “a culture of compassion” at the school. Similarly, Jasmine claimed that getting to know her colleagues on a more personal level helped her be more accepting and empathetic with them. Participating in this study helped teachers realize that learning about their coworkers and engaging in meaningful discussions created a feeling of fraternity that is currently lacking in their profession.

Dominique said, “Now … thanks to you, we have this little group, so we can talk. But what about the teachers who don’t have that? Who do they ask?” She wanted other teachers to share in the experience and feel supported in the workplace.
In general, the teachers in this study believed that there were many other people in the school community who would appreciate the chance to explore issues of identity and learn about diversity and its impact on education. Participants saw value in the experience they were having in the CoP and wanted to extend the opportunity to all teachers. They also acknowledged that requiring people to participate in critical reflection on identity, culture, and teaching practice could be counterproductive. They agreed that it would be best to welcome those who were open and interested, rather than making it mandatory. When participants were expressing their desires to include more faculty and staff, they were demonstrating alignment because they wanted to expand participation beyond the boundaries of the existing CoP.

*Wanting to continue.* Another form of alignment that occurred in the study was that participants wanted the CoP to continue after the study was over. From the beginning, participants were engaged in the CoP and appreciative of the opportunity to dialogue with the other members. For example, after the first meeting, Heidi wrote, “I left our session desperately wanting to talk some more and eager to see what happens throughout this process.” As the study continued, participants began to realize that they needed more time to develop cultural competence and reflect on their teaching practice.

In her final written reflection, Jasmine admitted, “I have gained endless perceptions of diversity. What it is. What it means for a teacher. What it means for a person. How it impacts students, etc. I have also learned that I have so much more to learn.” Participants became more aware of various aspects of culture, identity, and
diversity during the eight-week study, but they also realized there was not enough time to develop all the skills and knowledge they need.

In her second interview, Nancy told me, “You started this thing, and you’ve opened Pandora’s Box.” She and several other members wanted to continue meeting in the future.

Leigh stressed, “If there were a way to do this in the coming school year, I think it would be very valuable.” These teachers realized that they needed more time to develop more comprehensive understandings of cultural identity and its influence on education.

Several participants suggested that meeting over a longer period of time would allow for more intimate discussions and encourage deeper exploration of difficult topics. For example, Nancy stated, “Our time was so limited. There are so many more things we could have gotten into that would have been a little bit more debatable. You know, a little hairier so to speak.” She believed the time limitations of the study may have made members of the CoP reluctant to delve too deep into contentious topics or afraid they might offend someone and not have time to fully explain themselves by the end of the meeting or the end of the study.

Jayne also believed that the short time frame of the study and the large number of participants inhibited discussions in some ways. She suggested working in triads or smaller groups and wanted more opportunities to speak and to hear others’ perspectives. She recommended strategies that she employed in her classroom for incorporating more voices to improve participants’ experience in the CoP in the future. Her suggestions
implied that she also wanted the group’s discussions to continue. Like other members, Jayne wanted to delve deeper into issues of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and work collaboratively to reflect on and improve teaching practice. Because members wanted to expand the scale and duration of this CoP, they were seeking to align their efforts with a broader community of educators and extend the practice into the next school year.

*Expanding the scope.* Another way the teachers in this study sought alignment was by looking for opportunities outside the CoP to continue learning about diversity and equity in education. Meg realized that her participation in the study was just the beginning for her, and she saw potential for including other teachers on the journey to become more culturally responsive. In her first interview, Meg described the CoP as “a catalyst for bigger changes.” She believed that if enough people at the school became vocal about and focused on inclusive and equitable education, the school culture might be transformed. She saw the work we did in the CoP as the beginning of a larger movement at the school. Meg valued not only the knowledge and skills she gained during the study but also the relationships she developed in the process. Feeling emboldened by the support of other like-minded teachers, she bragged, “I’ve got my little posse behind me.” By this she meant that she felt confident in reaching out to other teachers who may not yet share her enthusiasm for social justice education because she knew that other teachers were champions of the cause and would support her.
Several participants said they wanted to continue learning about the impact of identity and cultural difference in their lives and teaching practices. Heidi mentioned that she wanted to find a workshop or conference to attend and asked that I continue sharing resources with her. Nancy recommended having diversity experts come speak to faculty and staff as well as viewing Ted Talks or following blogs about equity in education. At the end of the study, teachers wanted to find venues beyond the CoP in which they could continue learning about the topics of cultural identity and diversity.

Unlike most CoPs that evolve organically and exist unobtrusively in people’s daily lives, the CoP in this study was intentionally and artificially created for the purpose of this research. Nonetheless, it was a successful endeavor in which participants demonstrated the three modes of belonging to a CoP—engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1998). The teachers in this study engaged in the process by attending group meetings, taking part in collaborative activities, sharing stories of personal experience, developing interpersonal relationships, learning about and from one another, and creating new meanings for themselves. The participants evidenced imagination when they recognized their own experiences in the lives of others and developed new perspectives that were more appreciative of difference. When members of the CoP said all teachers would benefit from similar opportunities and looked for ways to continue their own learning, they were indicating a need to align their experience in the CoP with the broader context of professional learning. The fact that the participants in this study so clearly demonstrated these important features of a CoP shows that it was a
productive and authentic venture. The participants in this study came together as a group, showed concern and passion for what they were doing, and interacted with one another to learn and make meaning thereby constituting a legitimate CoP (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In the next section, I provide a description of how participants engaged in critical reflection while in the CoP.

Critical Reflection within the Community of Practice

Participating in the CoP inspired teachers to engage in critical reflection. They began to critique their personal beliefs, recognize their assumptions, and question their teaching practices. In the process, some participants also became more empathetic.

Inspiring Reflection

Within the CoP, participants experienced critical reflection inspired by engaging in activities and interacting with other members. The teachers frequently commented that the activities we did as a group encouraged them to contemplate aspects of their identity more deeply. In her last journal entry, Leigh explained, “I think the best ways of exploring identity and discussion of it were the activities that made us define ourselves.” The Social Identity Wheel, the Thinking about Our Own Identities handout, and the identity statement were powerful activities for Leigh because they required her to examine what she believed about who she was before engaging in discussion with others about their identities.

Jayne described the Diversity Profile as “eye opening because it shows the discrepancy between what we believe to be true about ourselves and what is actually
true”. Making a physical tally of the different types of people she interacted with on a regular basis forced Jayne and several other participants to alter their assessment of their own experiences with diversity.

Some participants found that the identity statement stimulated thought about who they are in relation to other people in their lives. Heidi stated, “It’s always interesting to see how you identify yourself, and then that helps you especially with your students when they’re trying to figure out how they’re going to identify themselves.” Heidi saw the examination of her own identity as a way of preparing herself to help students in their efforts to understand their identities. Lucy appreciated the opportunity to reflect while writing her identity statement, and she admitted that there was little time in her daily life to carefully consider the complex factors that make her who she is. She was effusively grateful for the opportunity to think and write about all the things that constitute her identity.

Conversations in face-to-face meetings also inspired critical reflection for the participants. Having discussions with people who had different perspectives helped Leigh realize she was less culturally responsive than she previously thought. After one meeting she wrote, “The people from other cultures, when they talked about how they approach things, it made me look back at myself and wonder.” Leigh’s interactions with other participants created opportunities to contrast her own beliefs, behaviors, and values with those of colleagues who believe and act differently.
Nancy recognized the free flow of discussion as a chance for participants to express themselves and be heard. She described the benefits of that type of conversation: “It might just be that I got to speak. . . . I had a voice. Someone listened to me.”

Appreciating the moment when Lucy was in tears while talking about how little she lets students into her life, Nancy said, “Ms. Reyes may say that ‘I got a release!’ You know and those things are what grows us as individuals where we become better than we were the day before.” Nancy recognized that group discussions provided an opportunity for all members of the CoP to examine their teaching practices and interrogate the assumptions on which they are based. Nancy was sensitive to Lucy’s painful realization and later thanked her for being so forthright during the meeting. Nancy’s comments also show that other members of the group could learn from Lucy’s moment of painful personal growth.

Participants used journal writing as a mechanism for capturing the thoughts, emotions, and questions that arose from their experience in the CoP. Hence, their journals contained significant critical reflection. For example, in her final journal entry, Jasmine wrote,

The best way to sum up my experience [in the CoP] is to say that I have spent lots of time reflecting on my practices. Through our face-to-face discussions and follow-up journal entries, I have gained endless perceptions of diversity, what it is, what it means for a teacher, what it means for a person, [and] how it impacts students.
Jasmine acknowledged that writing journals after group discussions contributed to her gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of diversity on her teaching practice.

Similarly, I realized that having time to process comments made by other members and capturing my thoughts in writing enhanced my reflection. After the fourth meeting, I was able to come to a new understanding about identity:

One thing that Dominique said in this week’s meeting really made me think. While we were looking at a list of identity characteristics and discussing which of them were visible and invisible, she said, “You don’t think about these categories until you are confronted with them”. I realized that what she said is really true because the categories that are a part of your identity are just a natural part of who you are. You don’t sit around questioning aspects of your identity that you are comfortable with. It is only when one of these characteristics is pointed out to you by another person or challenged by an experience you have that you become conscious of the trait.

This realization made me more aware of when other participants would mention times when they experienced identity confrontations. For example, Nancy spoke of people reacting to her Southern accent; Dominique expressed frustration with people constantly asking her, “Where are you from?”; and Heidi talked about students accusing one another of not being Black because they dislike certain foods. Without the opportunity to write and make connections between other participants’ comments and my own ideas, I may not have reached this level of critical reflection. Much of the critical reflection that took
place in this study was inspired by participation in group activities, discussions, and journal writing. Teachers also critiqued themselves and their beliefs, recognized assumptions they were making, and asked questions about their practice.

Critiquing Self and Practice

Participants in this study were able to reflect critically on their own identities and on their teaching practice. In a discussion about identity categories, Serah spoke about her dislike for conventional identity labels. She explained, “I identify as a spiritual person, as a sensitive person, an intuitive person, all these things, but not necessarily these labels like Black, female, gay. Like those labels that society has given us.” She recognized that how she identified herself differs from how other people might categorize her. Serah also discussed the pain she experiences when she feels forced to hide her true self in certain situations and in her position as a teacher. She described how she dealt with the pain of repeatedly coming out to others “like it’s the first time even though [she] came out many years ago”. Her candor in speaking about her own experiences prompted the group to discuss the power of heteronormativity—the belief that heterosexuality is the norm or natural expression of sexual orientation (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.d). This discussion helped other members of the CoP recognized the unexamined privilege that comes with being a heterosexual female.

Jayne also reflected on the labels she used to identify herself and recognized that she was selective in how she shared certain aspects of her identity with people she encountered:
I think there are some labels that we put on ourselves that are easy for us to claim and share with the world and then there are others, for various reasons, that feel more private. Sometimes we don’t want to share those aspects because they are identities that are just for us or for those close to us to know about. Other times maybe we aren’t sure how those identities will be received by those around us, and we would rather not risk sharing them.

Like Serah, Jayne understood that it is often safer or more comfortable to be selective in revealing some parts of her identity. Jayne acknowledged, “There are so many emotions wrapped up in political, religious, and racial conversations.” She admitted that she always felt tension when discussing politics and wanted to assume that everyone held the same political views that she did. Jayne was conscious of her tendency to avoid situations where she might find herself in strong opposition to others on these issues. In a journal entry she asked, “How do we press in and try and listen and understand first, and then walk away still respecting each other?” This question shows that participating in the CoP provided Jayne with an opportunity not only to reflect on her own beliefs and behaviors but also to search for new ways to engage in challenging conversations with others who may disagree with her perspectives.

In addition to examining themselves, participants were also able to critique some aspects of their teaching practice. Jasmine admitted that examining and labeling aspects of her own identity caused her to think more deeply about cultural diversity. Speaking about the reflective activities completed in the CoP, she said, “[they] forced me to take a
deep look at myself, my behaviors and my practices particularly in my professional life where I pride myself on fairness—treating all of my students the ‘same’ because that is fair, right?” Jasmine’s perspective on fairness evolved. She began to recognize that ignoring cultural, linguistic, and racial differences in the classroom was detrimental to her students. She came to understand that “‘seeing’ their differences is how we begin to be unbiased”. This revelation led to changes in the way that Jasmine viewed her students and her role in honoring and appreciating their diversity.

Lucy also came to realize that she was not fully appreciating the diverse perspectives her students bring to the classroom:

I forget that my students come from different backgrounds. I teach Spanish to students who learn not just the language, but also the culture of the Spanish speaking countries. When I ask students to compare their culture, traditions, and customs with the Hispanic culture, I assume that all of them have the same cultural identity. Their [graphic organizers] always have the American culture vs. Hispanic culture, when in reality it should be each student’s culture based on their origin, customs, and traditions. I think that if I incorporate all cultures the class could be a better experience for all.

Lucy recognized that she was assuming that students would want to compare and contrast the “American culture” with the Hispanic culture they were learning about in her class. Participating in CoP helped her understand that students may identify more closely with another cultural background, and she believed that providing them the opportunity to
choose a different culture for comparison would be an enriching opportunity for all her students.

Meg recognized that aspects of her personality were influencing the job she was doing as a first-year teacher at Wood Valley Middle School. She observed, “One of the pieces of my identity that I don’t think always serves me well is the desire to be good at my job. I don’t like to be seen as someone who makes mistakes or who struggles.” She acknowledged the humbling experiences and insecurities of being a novice teacher, “Intellectually, I know that I shouldn’t be a phenomenal teacher yet. . . . Emotionally, I still struggle with the fact that I don’t always know the right answer or what I should do in every teaching situation.” Meg understood that it will take time to grow her teaching practice and develop the level of confidence she is accustomed to having in professional settings. Her critique of self and of her practice helped her accept her potential for growth as a teacher.

Participating in the CoP provided members with an opportunity to examine aspects of their own cultural identity and evaluate the influence of cultural differences on their teaching practice. This process also gave teachers a chance to explore assumptions they make about teaching, learning, and students.

Recognizing Assumptions

Assumptions are the often unquestioned ways of thinking that people use to understand the world and govern their actions (Brookfield, 2017). While critically
reflecting on their own cultural identity, teachers in this study were able to recognize some of their assumptions and question their validity.

Talking about the influence of assumptions on people’s daily experiences, Heidi said, “I think that all people, children and adults, have inherent ideas about who they are, who people are in general. These ideas or beliefs are based on their family values and traditions.” She recognized that cultural values determine how people interpret the world around them and position themselves within it. She noted that the “practices, mannerisms, [and] reactions” people manifest depend on where and how they were raised.

Heidi acknowledged that many of people’s assumptions are rooted in elaborate and complex systems of cultural identity. She said, “Educators need to recognize that we may not be aware of the diversity of those components. We need to be active listeners that refrain from assumptions and preconceived notions of . . . identity.” Heidi was mindful of the ways in which her own assumptions could lead her to make judgements about others. She recognized the potential danger of making assumptions about her students and having preconceived ideas about who they were, what they knew, and what they could do.

Lucy noticed that examining her assumptions and analyzing her personal biases made her more conscious of her interactions with students. She acknowledged holding very traditional gender stereotypes, saying, “In my culture and the way I was raised, you know, pink is for girls, [and] blue is for boys”. In the first interview, Lucy talked about a
recent incident with a female student who had drawn tattoo-like marks on her arms with a black marker. Lucy told the girl that what she had done looked very “masculine.” However, Lucy said she quickly realized that her comment was based on her own views about gender norms. She said, “And then I immediately, I immediately—with what I just learned from being with you in the [CoP]—said, ‘Oh my God! I should have never said it. Probably I offended her.’” Lucy was able to recognize how her comment was rooted in her own assumptions about gender and that those assumptions may not be the same ones held by the student. Lucy took the opportunity to apologize to the student and engage in a discussion about gender stereotypes. Lucy said that the critical reflection she experienced in the CoP helped her become more aware of the influence her assumptions have on her teaching practice and allowed her to turn a potentially negative encounter with a student into one that opened communication about diverse perspectives.

Jayne expressed a desire to learn more about being culturally conscious and responsive when working with English learners (ELs). She acknowledged that her own point of view could be a barrier to teaching and learning in her diverse classroom. She said, “Little assumptions that I still make about things. It’s always, it feels like it’s always like small things, but . . . you’re inside your own American worldview. Even if you mentioned Christmas, or you mention whatever.” Jayne recognized that using Christian references that are an important part of her frame of reference can be problematic when working with students who are Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or from other
faith traditions. Recognizing assumptions requires teachers, as Jayne said, to “take a step back and think about” how their world views may differ from those of students.

During the study, I also had the opportunity to scrutinize some of my assumptions. I shared one amusing example in the group text thread about meeting a new student from India. When first introduced to him, I did not quite hear or understand what he said his name was, so I asked him to repeat it. Then I repeated what I thought he said, “Joor-Jah”. He smiled, nodded, and went to class. When I later looked at the roster, I discovered his first name was “George!” I had just assumed it would be a name that I would find unusual and that I would struggle to pronounce.

A more profound realization happened after I read White Fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) and then talked with Serah during her second interview. Serah disclosed that she often felt that as a “Black woman queer person” she was often called on to do more of “the emotional labor” of examining identity than many other people. I agreed that the burden is unduly placed on people of color, and I commented:

It’s really White people who’ve got work to do to recognize structural racism. . . .

Thinking about the harm that I do, just because of who I am, and the history of where we are, and how the world has worked. And finding better ways to take responsibility for that. And not making that somebody else’s job.

My experience conducting this research, participating in the CoP, examining my identity, critiquing my assumptions, and learning more about other people’s perspectives made me more conscious of my complicity in White supremacy and more aware of the impact of
my own culture on my teaching. Like other participants in this study, I began to recognize my assumptions more easily and ask questions about the intersection of cultural identity and teaching practice.

Asking Questions

Many scholars have suggested that asking questions is an essential feature of developing critical consciousness and an integral part of becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003). When reflecting critically on their experiences, teachers in this study frequently questioned their beliefs, values, and teaching practices.

Dominique stated, “Coming to this group [CoP] makes me question. It makes me ask myself a lot of questions.” Dominique asked questions about how aspects of her cultural identity as a French-speaking Black African influenced her interactions with White and Black people in the United States. She wondered about how prepared she was to support transgender students. Dominique also asked many questions about the methods and strategies used to teach world languages to English speaking students. For example, after receiving advice from a curriculum coordinator to ask students questions in English in her French class, Dominique wondered, “What is the point? If you’re really in France, you have to answer the questions in French, so the question has to be in the French”. She also reflected on the pedagogical challenges of teaching content and culture to monolingual students who see little value in learning French: “So I was asking myself,
am I making it relevant to my students?’” Dominique realized that being responsive to student needs and making the content relevant was essential to effective teaching.

Towards the end of the study, Dominique also began to question the authorities that make decisions about the school calendar and testing schedules. She asked, “Who makes the calendar? Do they sit and think about all of these [religious holidays]? . . . It comes to Ramadan, and we have to do testing? I say, do these people really think about the people we are serving?” These examples show that Dominique was critical in her examination of herself, of her teaching practice, and of the educational structures in which she works.

Jayne was another participant who asked many critical questions during the study. After listening to Dominique’s comments about race not being as controversial in Africa, Jayne wondered if it was possible for people to be more accepting of racial differences “when everything is packaged around the idea of race”. She asked, “Our issues are so much deeper and more complicated than skin color, but how can we see them with clarity?” Jayne recognized race as an important topic that needs interrogation and also as a distraction away from other serious issues that divide people. Responding to Jasmine’s discussion of her prior belief that teachers should take a colorblind approach, Jayne wrote in her journal, “Denying that color exists isn’t the answer. Emphasizing color as the ultimate trait is also not the answer. So how do we celebrate color as an integral part of people and recognize how our own color impacts those around us?” Jayne’s question implies that she appreciates the complexity of race as a contentious factor in society and
in education, and she acknowledges that there are no simple answers. Jayne connected this question to a unit she was teaching on human rights in which some students read The Hate U Give (Thomas, 2017). In that novel, Starr, the African-American main character, confronts her White boyfriend when he says he does not see her color. Starr tells him that if he does not see her race, he does not see her as her full self. By contextualizing her question in both social reality and the language arts curriculum she uses, Jayne provided a great example of how cultural identity and teaching practice often intersect.

Participating in the CoP and engaging in critically reflective activities and journal writing helped Jayne recognize inconsistencies in her own guiding principles and her enactment of them in the world.

Other participants also asked questions that demonstrated critical reflection on cultural identity and teaching practice. For example, Serah wondered, “I’m Black, I’m female, and I’m queer. So where is my responsibility to people who are like me?” Serah was reflecting on her efforts to be the best person and the best teacher she can be in a “world that is not set up in favor” of people like her. She explained that “being in the classroom with all these different students and wanting to support students, protect students, and then at the same time not allow my own biases to come into the classroom” was an impossible undertaking. Serah confided that this tension is a major stressor in her work as a teacher.

I also had questions about the influence of my cultural and racial identity on my teaching practice. In thinking about my own identity, I started to wonder about how
students in my classes felt empowered or discouraged from actualizing their identities. Reflecting on my practice, I asked, “What situations do I as a teacher create in the classroom that support [students] in the process of understanding who they are? In what ways am I making that experience unpleasant or even painful?” Participating in this CoP helped me better understand my responsibility to create safe and comfortable spaces for students to express themselves and show respect for others who may be different. I became more aware of the power I have as a teacher to affect positive identity development for students.

As Brookfield (2016) explained, within the context of critical theory, questioning hegemonic assumptions is an essential component of critical reflection. These examples of participants questioning their beliefs and assumptions about teaching provide further evidence that critical reflection was happening in this CoP.

Developing Empathy

In addition to asking questions, participants in this study showed increased empathy for students, colleagues, and people with different life experiences. For example, Jasmine wrote in her reflective journal about how she thought “as human beings we should constantly grow, constantly deepen our understanding of the human race, constantly evolve”. She believed that developing increased awareness of racial, cultural, sexual orientation, as well as physical, emotional, and intellectual differences, was essential to that evolutionary process. Her experience in the CoP gave her a greater
appreciation of categories of difference. She viewed empathy as a tool for becoming a
more highly evolved human being and a more effective teacher.

Some participants made specific comments about developing more empathy for
students. Leigh talked about the impact that government crackdowns on undocumented
immigrants might have on the wellbeing of children at the school. She lamented, “The
whole paranoia that our immigrant children must be living in! . . . How will they
approach walking into the building and feeling like . . . they’re safe, and I’m not going to,
you know, turn them into somebody or something?” Leigh worried that raids by
government agencies, like those happening across the country, might make immigrant
students feel insecure and distrustful of teachers and school staff. She was able to
imagine what life would be like from their perspective and empathize with their position.

Jayne frequently mentioned the identity conflict she witnessed many of her
African-American students experiencing. She explained:

They ridicule each other for talking certain ways, for acting certain ways, for
caring about homework, or school, or good grades. It is as if they are not able to
be both proud to be Black and proud to care about school; their identity must be
one of the other.

She empathized with their identity struggles and acknowledged that these feelings were
an additional burden on top of the already difficult task of navigating adolescence and
developing positive social and academic identities. She asked, “How do I help them see
that they can be both, that they do not have to deny their identity?” Jayne recognized that
many students feel torn between two seemingly diametrical identities. Her insights into their dilemmas were based on strong personal relationships she had developed with students in this situation throughout her teaching career. She understood their perspectives and wanted to help them see there were other options.

Serah described a situation in which she consciously chose to support a transgender student. In the WhatsApp thread, Serah wrote:

We have a student named Alex. Alex was born a girl but identifies as a boy. Today, during field day sign up, he asked me if he should sign up for the girl sports or the boy sports. I was stumped and had no idea what to say. After a breath, I said, “Alex, I have never had to think about this before. I would say that I don’t care either way, and I think I should let you make that decision.” Alex decided that he wanted to compete as a boy. I signed him up under all boy sports. I have no idea how this will go over with the powers that be, but I decided to show Alex empathy in the moment. Fingers crossed!

Confronted with a new situation, Serah relied on her intuition and respectfully allowed the student to make the decision. She attributed her response to empathy because she felt that if she were in the same position, she would want to decide for herself and not have the decision made by someone else. Serah, like other teachers in this study, was able to imagine what her student was going through and respond in empathetic ways that validated and supported the student’s identity.
Participants were also able to develop greater empathy for their colleagues. For instance, Jasmine talked about how she thought getting to know the people she works with on a more personal level would help her develop stronger and more productive working relationships. She claimed, “The more I understand the more empathetic I can be. Because I’ve had a lot of pain . . . so it’s very easy, if I know, to put myself in somebody else’s shoes and understand what they might be feeling.” Jasmine lamented the fact that she knew so little about many of her colleagues and that busy school schedules leave little time for the kind of dialogue and intimacy that she experienced in the CoP.

Jasmine and Serah both acknowledged that they were close friends before the study began. During one meeting of the CoP, Jasmine asked Serah’s permission to share a story that helped other members of the group better empathize with Serah and other non-heterosexual colleagues. Jasmine related a conversation the two had two weeks earlier about displaying photos of family and loved ones on their desks at school. Because Serah was guarded about her same-sex marriage in the workplace, she did not display pictures of her wife. She told Jasmine, “I don’t have that kind of freedom to put the people I love on my desk.” And even though Serah and Jasmine had been friends for years, Jasmine had not considered the questions that might arise from such a photograph. With tears in her eyes and a quavering voice, Jasmine told those present at the meeting that day,
You don’t realize how people, and in this case, people that you love, because I love her. She’s my friend. How they have to live their lives constantly worrying about what somebody is going to think or what somebody is going to say.

This story provided a concrete example of the discrimination people in same-sex relationships often feel in the workplace. Other members of the group responded with comments of support and encouragement for Serah. A few participants said they believed that being more open about her sexual orientation might be beneficial for students who identify as homosexual or whose parents do. After this meeting, Lucy wrote in her journal, “The session also helped me to understand and be more sensitive about how some people with a different sexual orientation than me are judged and the suffering that they go through in the everyday life.” This statement is particularly significant because Lucy, who described herself as a devout Catholic, was able to empathize not only with Serah as an individual but also with other non-heterosexuals despite the tenets of her conservative faith.

Within the context of this CoP, teachers were able to engage in dialogue and activities that inspired critical reflection and allowed them to critique themselves and the practice. Participants began to recognize assumptions they made and to question their beliefs and practices. Reflecting on their own cultural identity in a collaborative setting helped teachers understand themselves and one another better. They recognized intimacy as a valuable tool that provided insight into different lived experiences and helped them imagine different perspectives. Engaging in critical reflection within the CoP resulted in
participants developing greater empathy for one another, for their students, and for people in general.

These examples provide evidence of the level of critical reflection that participants engaged in during the study. In the next section, I describe how participants’ experiences in the CoP led to increased awareness of cultural identity and diversity in their own lives and in their teaching practice.

Increased Awareness

Engaging in conversations with those who hold different perspectives can make it easier for people to become aware of their own points of view (Mezirow, 2009). Participants in this study received feedback within the CoP that allowed them to reflect critically on their points of view and to examine assumptions underlying their perspectives. This type of critical reflection led to increased awareness, first of themselves as individual cultural beings and of the other members of the CoP. This awareness of fellow participants caused the teachers to want to know more about their colleagues who were not in the study. Additionally, teachers developed new appreciation for the diversity of their students and expressed a desire to learn more about students’ backgrounds. This heightened consciousness about the people with whom they work allowed the participants to become more aware of the influence of culture and diversity on their teaching practice.

Brookfield (2017) recommended that teachers scrutinize their practices by looking through four lenses: “students’ eyes, colleagues’ perceptions, personal
experience, and theory” (p. 19). The types of awareness that participants experienced in this study closely aligned with the first three of those lenses. Although theory did not surface explicitly in the participants’ comments, they did express an appreciation for discussing these issues as a group which speaks to the power of social learning theory.

Awareness of Self

Participating in the CoP and reflecting on cultural identity helped members develop an increased awareness of their own identity. During the fifth meeting, Meg talked about how intentional reflection on cultural identity made her more conscious of her understanding of herself and how her identity influenced her interactions with others. She said, “I think that for a long time I was just kind of floating around the world. And I was like, just being me and doing my thing. And like not even really paying attention to it.” After participating in the CoP for several weeks, Meg admitted, “Now I think a lot more about like how the different elements of my identity impact the way that I interact with other people and how I see myself, too”. The activities and discussions she engaged in during the study made Meg realize that there were many aspects of identity to which she was not paying attention. She explained, “Now I have this new sort of . . . list of identity categories that I’m working on being more responsive to or be more open to. But what am I still missing?” This shows that by becoming more aware of her own identity, Meg was able to be more perceptive about the identity traits of others. She also declared a willingness to learn and grow her understanding of differences in an effort to be more inclusive and respectful of others.
After attending her first meeting with the CoP, Serah indicated how she became aware of a preference for associating with certain groups of people. In her journal she wrote, “This week, I noticed that I am much more comfortable around Black people, women, and queers. . . If they identify with at least one of these, I am more likely to trust them.” She added, “At my core, I identify as Black before I identify with any other ‘other’ identification and feel that as a whole this part of my ‘otherness’ is the most oppressed and neglected in the world.” Serah explained that because her Blackness is a visible identity trait, it is recognized and judged more often by others than her spirituality or homosexuality which may be invisible in many situations. Critically reflecting on identity allowed Serah to arrive at new insights about herself and how others may perceive her.

I also gain awareness into my own identity and the influence of race on my understanding of the world. After discussing race and White privilege during several of the CoP meetings, I read an article titled “What is White Privilege, Really?” (Collins, 2018), in which the author explained how there is a “power of normal” (p. 39) that comes with Whiteness. Conversely, people of color are routinely denied such privileges and instead routinely face “racial profiling, stereotypes and lack of compassion for their struggles” (Collins, 2018, p. 40). I shared my reaction to the article with the group in the group text thread:

It made me think about the advantages I have had in my life that I previously attributed to my own to hard work or luck, but I am now realizing [they] are
unearned privileges that were created, developed, and reinforced in our social systems over time.

My experience as a participant in the CoP made me more aware of the role of race in my life. Engaging in collaborative discussions with other White people and people of color helped me realize that I needed to learn more about this aspect of my identity. Therefore, I sought out information to help better understand myself and the unexamined privileges I experience because of my skin color. This increased awareness of race and privilege altered the way I view myself and how I position myself in relation to other people.

In her first interview, Jayne talked about how the CoP meetings made her more aware of the importance of exploring her own identities and frames of reference. She acknowledged that many teachers “are completely unaware” of their own biases. She said, “We can’t help our students navigate these difficult things when we’re dealing with them just like they are.” Jayne realized that it was essential for her to first recognize her own prejudices before being able to help others do the same. The CoP provided her some much needed space to explore and talk about aspects of difference and come to new understandings about diversity in her work as a teacher.

Awareness of Colleagues

The teachers in this study gained a greater awareness of diversity among their colleagues. Despite all the participants in this study being female, they provide perspectives from different races, sexual orientations, ages, and countries of origin. Lucy’s discussion of Hispanic communication styles, Dominique’s beliefs about how
ethnicity is conceptualized differently in the Ivory Coast and the United States, and Jasmine’s comments about discrimination within Black communities enriched conversation. Jayne said she enjoyed listening to her coworkers’ reflections on culture. She noted, “I appreciated everyone’s openness to sharing very personal experiences and insights about their own cultural shaping.” Learning about her colleagues helped Jayne understand perspectives different from her own.

Meg appreciated that group members were able to respect one another’s differences and able to find commonalities. She noted, “I think that our group is diverse enough that we are able to recognize and appreciate our differences, but we are also able to identify those areas in which we are similar.” Meg viewed the CoP as an opportunity to get to know people’s values and how they identify themselves. She believed that understanding more about her coworkers’ values helped her build stronger relationships with other members of the CoP.

Jasmine commented, “Our meetings also served as constant reminders of how diverse we are as adults. We often place so much emphasis on addressing diversity in the classroom that we forget that diversity exist among teachers as well.” This shows that working in the CoP helped Jasmine to become more aware of her colleagues’ cultural identities.

Several participants expressed a desire to have more opportunities to learn about and from their coworkers. Leigh explained, “There are few other opportunities for me to learn about my colleagues. We have quick conversations in the hallway or by the copier,
but we’re off to duty or class . . . and have no opportunities for deep discussion.” By contrasting the brief and superficial interactions she normally had with coworkers with the deliberate and introspective conversations she had in the CoP, Leigh demonstrated an appreciation for the depth of dialogue and level of intimacy that she experienced in the study, as well as a longing to experience meaningful conversations with colleagues more often.

Similarly, Jasmine said, “You see people walking around the building and you think that you know them, and really you don’t. Like you don’t know their story at all.” Like Leigh, she attributed this lack of familiarity with insufficient time.

Nancy said the knowledge and insight she gained about her colleagues during the study gave her “more recognition of the fact that we’re all dealing with the same thing”. She said this increased awareness of her coworkers’ experiences made them less “like strangers” and made her feel “more connected”. She admitted that she would be “more likely to reach out” to those who were in the CoP when she needed help or had questions about issues of cultural difference.

Heidi believed it was beneficial to learn more about the other members of CoP, and she advocated for extending that opportunity to all the teachers and staff at Wood Valley Middle School. Working in the CoP to explore culture and examine identity helped Heidi and other members of the group develop a greater appreciation of the richness of diversity among their colleagues and made them more aware of the importance of building meaningful relationships through dialogue.
Awareness of Students

Participants in the study also increased their awareness of students. Lucy explained how reflecting on her own identity and learning about her colleagues helped her think more deeply about her students. Lucy recognized that having opportunities to increase awareness of cultural differences can strengthen relationships and encourage tolerance among adults and children. She saw benefits for both staff and students to engage in these types of activities.

Members of the CoP developed specific insights into student experiences, as well as more broad understandings of student perspectives and identities. One example of increasing awareness of students occurred when Leigh and I gave the students in our class an opportunity to make Mother’s Day cards. We realized that our experience in the CoP made us more sensitive and reflective about how some students might feel during the activity. We wondered about students who did not live with their mothers, students who had stepmothers, students who had two fathers, students whose mothers were dead, and students from other countries that do not celebrate the holiday. We realized that what seemed like a simple undertaking might be uncomfortable for some students.

Lucy provided another example when she told a story about a student who kept falling asleep during state-mandated testing. After talking with him, she found out that he was getting up at four o’clock every morning to pray at his mosque. He said that he believed that praying would help him throughout his day, so he felt it was important to go even during high-stakes testing. This conversation helped Lucy become more aware of
the influence of religion on student behaviors and gave her an appreciation of the student’s devotion.

Meg recognized that a weekly homework assignment that required students to use their school-issued computer to complete online reading lessons was putting some of her students at a disadvantage. She explained, “I didn’t really take into account that there are some kids that leave school and don’t have the ability to spend 100 minutes on their computer.” She said that some students did not have Wi-Fi connections at home, and others were responsible for taking care of younger siblings while their parents worked night shifts. She became aware that her actions were unduly penalizing students “both in terms of their lack of growth in literacy and also in terms of their grade”. She confessed, “I don’t think I did a very good job of sort of setting up an opportunity for those students to have that access,” and she vowed to look for alternatives for students in the future.

While attending a Wood Valley soccer game, Leigh noticed that there were few parents in attendance, especially for students of color and those who were in the English learner program. At the match she talked with another teacher and an administrator about all the time they had spent on the sidelines watching their own children play sports. Leigh wondered, “Why were there no family members in attendance? . . . Are their parents working or too busy to attend? Are their children’s games not as important as I thought my children’s events were?” Leigh recognized that her students’ experience playing sports was different than that of her own children and others whose parents were always there to cheer for them. She asked herself, “What do I know about these students’
history and home life?” Participating in the study made Leigh more conscious of her students’ lives and curious about their backgrounds. She reflected, “We run them through the 6th-grade mill and spit them out into 7th grade, but I am sure that a deeper knowledge of them and connection to their lives would make me a better teacher and serve them better.” Leigh recognized that increasing her knowledge about students’ lives outside of school might allow her to better meet their needs inside the classroom.

Participants in the study also developed broader insights about student experiences. For example, Heidi explained that although she believed she was generally observant of students’ behaviors and circumstances, she believed that participating in the CoP heightened her awareness. She commented, “Now that I have been in this group, . . . I am more in tune to the comments that my students make.” Heidi said she was more conscious of remarks students made about race, culture, ethnicity, and identity.

Reflecting on her own identity in the CoP and discussing visible and invisible identity traits prompted Meg to consider student identities more carefully. She shared this realization: “The way that I see my students doesn’t always have to do with how they define themselves and . . . the thing that is most powerful to them . . . is [maybe] something that I can’t see in the classroom.” Meg became more cognizant of the process of getting to know her students. She talked about how the identity she constructed for students often derived from their behaviors in class (e.g., academic, social, attitudinal). Her experience in the CoP helped her understand that her perceptions might be inaccurate and influenced by her own biases. She explained, “But so many times those things that I
think of as behaviors are really sort of symptoms of some other piece of their identity.”

She gave an example of a student who frequently slept in her class. Meg found out toward the end of the school year that the student was responsible for taking care of four younger siblings. Despite this, the student always came in with her homework completed. Thinking back on the identity she had assigned to this student, Meg said, “I had always defined [her] as the kid who sleeps in class. But really, [she was] the kid who is responsible, and caring, and the primary caretaker in her family.” Meg acknowledged that if she had known this information earlier in the year, her interactions with the student might have been different. This example shows how Meg became increasingly aware of the disconnect between her ideas about student identities and the realities of her students’ lives.

Awareness of Teaching Practice

For participants in this study, the process of exploring their own cultural identities resulted in increased awareness of colleagues, students, and teaching practice. Teachers’ reflections made them more aware of their instructional and relational approaches in the classroom. Dominique mentioned how her experience in the CoP made her more conscious of the characteristics of identity that deserve consideration when planning lessons for diverse students. She described a change in her thinking that occurred after being in the study, “I need to consider [socioeconomic] status, the gender, all of that. I have to think about it now whenever I’m giving a lesson. Before, it didn’t come to my mind, but now I’m aware of it.” Dominique’s heightened awareness of the influence of
these factors on student learning shows that she was contemplating changes that would make her lesson plans more culturally responsive.

One of the biggest realizations for participants in this study was the importance of developing deeper relationships with students in order to facilitate learning, especially when teachers and students are from different cultural groups. Jasmine mentioned that it is often easy for her to connect with African-American students, but she realized that she needs to put more effort into connecting with students of other races and ethnicities. She commented, “I have learned in order to reach my full potential as a teacher, I must work harder to establish those connections that don’t form naturally.”

Similarly, Lucy began to understand that setting aside time to relate to students on a personal level was an area of her practice that she was neglecting. Lucy admitted that her previously held view about not wasting class time to build relationships was no longer serving her, and she vowed to make more space for sharing her life in class and to get to know her students on a more personal level.

I also experienced a change in my approach to relationships with students. In one of my journals, I wrote, “Since joining this CoP, I have tried to make more time to talk with and get to know my students better.” The discussions we had in the CoP helped me understand that knowing more about students’ prior educational experiences and home life can help me contextualize their academic performance.

Increased awareness of the influence of cultural identity on education caused Jayne to question her reaction to a situation that came up during standardized testing.
When an African-American girl finished a section of the test very quickly, Jayne wondered if this constituted an irregularity. However, shortly thereafter a “socially awkward White boy” finished the test and Jayne thought it was not unusual assuming he was a “gifted” student. Jayne later reflected on this experience in her journal,

It shows I am seeing students through my own lenses and not through knowing them or [their] reality. It might mean that I more readily believe in the academic abilities of White kids than Black kids or even boys than girls. . . . This has a lot of meaning for my practice because it revealed potential bias within myself. Viewing students in this way can have way more serious implications for how I interact with students and run my own classroom than a simple incident report on standardized testing. Do I believe that all students are innately capable? Do I believe that gender, race, etc. are not defining factors for intelligence? I would say that I don’t, but maybe deep down I do.

This incident caused Jayne to reflect on her assumptions about students’ races in relation to their academic abilities. She recognized that the implications of her habits of mind reached far beyond one isolated event and could be influencing the judgments she made about the students she worked with every day. Jayne attributed this heightened awareness of students to her participation in the CoP, and she was not the only one. All 10 teachers in this study expressed a belief that the experience raised their consciousness about cultural identity and the impact diversity has on their personal and professional lives. The increased awareness that resulted from participating in the CoP led teachers to
alter their beliefs about cultural identity and its relationship to teaching practice, to see new possibilities for themselves as culturally responsive educators, and to make specific changes to their pedagogy.

A Spectrum of Transformations

Learning within a CoP is a transformative process that changes what people know, how they go about their work, and who they understand themselves to be (Wenger, 1998). The CoP in this study provided a venue for participants to explore alternative understandings of culture, race, ethnicity, and linguistic differences by sharing personal and professional experiences with one another. Participants frequently asked for clarification and shared similar stories as a way of making meaning together. Although the experience was sometimes painful, these conditions allowed participants to make personal and professional transformations that ranged from subtle to dramatic.

Discomfort as a Component of Transformation

A certain level of discomfort often accompanies transformation (Mezirow, 1997). Several teachers in this study experienced moments of unease that led to change. Some participants talked about being ashamed of things they had done or thought as teachers. For example, Dominique admitted feeling embarrassed about her irritation when students did not understand references to contemporary political and entertainment figures that appeared in her assignments.

When Jasmine was trying to reconcile her new understandings about diversity with previous beliefs, she said, “I was like, shame on you. All this time you’re thinking
everybody is the same. I am trying to treat everybody the same”. She realized that individual differences are what make people unique, and she came to realize that the colorblind, “everyone is equal” approach that had guided her practice for 20 years was no longer acceptable to her.

Meg also felt shame after examining some aspects of her practice. In her first interview, she said, “There were some things that I realized about my own teaching that I’m like kind of embarrassed about, kind of ashamed about that, you know, I had those thoughts or had those feelings.” However, Meg realized that becoming more conscious of such things allowed her to “take a step back” and ask herself, “Is this really what you think? Do you really need to be so strict about this particular thing?” She said that participating in the CoP helped her reevaluate her priorities in the classroom.

In several instances during group meetings, participants were moved to tears in apparent discomfort. For example, Lucy cried when she talked about how she never shared stories from her life with students because she felt class time was too precious to waste on personal matters. Serah shed tears while discussing the pain of being “othered” and having to hide her family from colleagues at school. Jasmine also cried when she talked about how Serah helped her recognize the privilege that comes from being a heterosexual woman. These tearful examples show change can often include painful moments and that pain can lead to transformation of people’s perspectives. In fact, I believe Jasmine’s realization about color blindness and Lucy’s recognition of the
importance of making personal connections with students qualify as “disorienting
dilemma[s]” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 94) that fostered changes to their frames of reference.

Despite these moments of discomfort—or perhaps because of them—the
experience of participating in the CoP resulted in a spectrum of transformations for
participants. Some changes were small and subtle, and others were dramatic and
actionable. For example, the teachers said they developed new understandings of how
race, culture, and socioeconomic status influenced their work with students. They also
recognized there were many opportunities for them to expand their knowledge and skills
for multicultural teaching. In a more dramatic fashion, some teachers took immediate
steps to change their instructional practices or their approaches to developing
relationships with students. The following paragraphs provide examples of the types of
transformations participants demonstrated.

Changes in Personal Perspectives

Some teachers in the study said they experienced transformations that changed the
way they thought about themselves personally or how they viewed their interactions with
other people. For example, Jasmine experienced a transformation to her philosophical
stance on human differences. She proclaimed, “I have always prided myself on being fair
and on not seeing color, and everybody is the same, when that is horrible!” Jasmine
valued fairness and believed ignoring differences was the best way to ensure that she was
being unbiased. However, her experience in the CoP made her realize that “everybody’s
not the same” and recognizing differences in a respectful way “is what stops you from
being biased”. Jasmine viewed this shift in perspective as a moment of personal growth that impacted her life in and out of school.

Nancy also recognized a change in her interactions with people outside of the workplace. She said the following encounter happened because of her experience in the CoP:

While in the hospital, I had this beautiful Nigerian nurse who took exceptional care of me. One day, during one of [our] many conversations, I asked her did she have a boyfriend. I immediately thought of Serah and what she shared at our last gathering. She spoke of people’s assumptions and how she has to continuously come out. My nurse had begun to answer when I interrupted her, apologizing for what I asked and what I should have asked. [The nurse] paused, and I then restated my question by asking her did she have either a boyfriend or a girlfriend. She smiled kindly and said no, she had neither but preferred men. She laughed and said, “My best friend is a lesbian. I can’t wait to call her and tell what you just did!”

In the moment, Nancy realized that her question was based in heteronormative assumptions. She reflected on comments made by Serah and realized the pain such assumptions can cause. She rephrased her question to be more culturally sensitive, and the nurse appreciated her actions. Nancy acknowledged the influence of the CoP by saying, “And so change begins. . . . I had never thought much about that question, but I
will be more cognizant in the future!” This is an indication of a transformation in understanding that would impact Nancy’s future behavior.

During the study, Meg was able to overcome a personality trait that she said sometimes held her back. She liked for others to view her as competent and effective in her career. She acknowledged that being a novice teacher was a humbling experience and recognized that it was natural for her to be learning how to be the culturally responsive teacher she strove to be. Meg said that participating in the CoP helped her overcome her tendency toward perfection, and it made her more willing to reach out to other teachers to share ideas about how to improve practice. She viewed participation in the study as the ideal opportunity for teachers “to fail forward together” in pursuit of more “culturally sensitive [and] social-justice-based classroom[s]”. Meg experienced a change in perspective that resulted in a change in behavior. She claimed, “I no longer think that I need to get it right first and then help others. . . . We may get it wrong along the way, but we may also make incremental changes in the right direction.” Her experience in the CoP convinced her that through collaboration and conversation with other educators, she would be able to enhance her practice and help other teachers do the same. The next section provides examples of the professional transformations that Meg and other teachers made.

Transformations in Teaching Practice

Many participants in the study said they experienced changes in perspective that influenced their teaching practice. As teachers developed new understandings about
cultural identity and diversity, they began to see themselves in new ways and perceive new possibilities for being more culturally responsive in their approach to teaching. Some participants also experienced more dramatic transformations that included taking action to further their learning about diversity and making specific changes to their lessons, teaching resources, and instructional techniques.

Subtle changes. Engaging in a CoP involves interacting with others, producing artifacts, and negotiating meaning; through this process members often develop new understandings about the topic under study (Wenger, 1998). This research project focused on cultural identity and its relationship to teaching practice. Over the course of the study, members of the CoP expressed transformations in the way they understood the relationship of these two things, and they began to imagine new possibilities for teaching and learning that incorporated what they learned in the group.

New understandings. Participants said they developed new understandings of how race, culture, gender, and socioeconomic status influenced their work with students. For example, Jasmine talked about how she “learned so much about experiences, and cultures, and children, and all their differences, and how that impacts the learning environment”. As a result, she came to understand that these factors “should influence our delivery of instruction, and it should have a direct impact on our planning for one class to another [and] one student to another”. Jasmine’s beliefs about the influence of student diversity on teaching practice changed during the study and resulted in her making specific changes to her teaching practice described later in this section.
Jayne became more aware of how her perspective as a White, Christian American impacted her teaching with diverse students, and she started to understand the importance of recognizing “yourself as a whole cultural person”. She acknowledged that she sometimes caught herself mentioning Christmas or referring to values or experiences that might be completely unfamiliar to her students. Reflecting on her “American worldview” Jayne said, “I realize the rest of the world doesn’t necessarily [hold the same worldview as I do], and the rest of the world is in our classroom.” She realized that in order to work effectively with diverse students, she needed to pay more attention to her own frame of reference and become more cognizant of the influence her own perspectives have on instructional practices. In the process of becoming more aware of herself as a cultural being, Jayne was able to develop a more culturally competent mindset and increase her capacity for recognizing and appreciating the wide range of diversity that her students bring to the classroom.

Expanded possibilities. Participants in this study also began to see themselves in new ways and recognize potential opportunities for becoming more culturally responsive in their teaching. For example, over the course of the study, Lucy started to realize that some of her personal convictions and approaches to teaching were preventing her from being a more effective teacher. Recognizing her tendency to keep her personal life separate from her work life, her reluctance to change, and her difficulty embracing people who think differently than she does, Lucy said, “It’s hard, but maybe … this conversation [in CoP meetings] can open up my mind a little bit more”. She understood that becoming
a more culturally responsive teacher would require her to share personal experiences with students to build stronger relationships, incorporate diverse perspectives, and adapt her teaching style and materials. By the end of the study, Lucy began to see herself as a more openminded and culturally competent teacher. Later in this section, I include details about specific transformations she made.

During the study, Meg developed a greater awareness of the power she had as a teacher to encourage her students to appreciate and value diversity. She explained, “I also want [students] to see someone modeling, like how to be more culturally responsive, or how to be more open to experiences. And sort of the joy and riches that that can bring to your own life.” Meg began to see herself not only as an English teacher, but also as a model of someone who is actively engaged with and appreciative of all kinds of diversity. She believed if students consistently saw her demonstrating cultural responsiveness and valuing socially just perspectives, they might also want to adopt those perspectives.

Participating in the CoP helped Nancy see potential opportunities for enacting changes at the personal level and on a larger scale. She believed participating in the CoP was an empowering experience for teachers, and she was encouraged by members’ ability to see “our society for what it is and what it can be . . . while seeing themselves as a part of the challenge and [the] solutions”. Over the course of the study, Nancy began to see herself and other teachers as agents of change. She felt that discussing and reflecting on issues such as culture, race, and identity within a
collaborative group helped teachers recognize the power they have to maintain the status quo or to make schooling more equitable for all.

Participants in this study experienced transformations in how they understood the role of cultural identity in their teaching practice and recognized new and expanded possibilities for becoming more culturally responsive. Teachers were able to imagine themselves as more culturally competent individuals, envision themselves as role models, and think of themselves as agents of positive social change. These subtle changes in perspectives represent one end of the spectrum of transformations exhibited by participants in this study. Other transformations, described in the following section, were more dramatic and overt.

More dramatic transformations. In addition to developing new understandings about cultural identity and diversity and seeing expanded possibilities for themselves as culturally responsive teachers, participants in this study also took action and made specific changes to their teaching practice.

Taking action. As a result of participation in this study, several teachers took immediate action to learn more about cultural identity and diversity, and they found ways to engage with other people interested in enacting culturally responsive and equitable education practices. For example, Meg attended a workshop sponsored by Teaching Tolerance called “Social Justice Education 101.” During this workshop she learned about social justice teaching standards, practices for anti-biased education, and strategies for honoring all identities. The workshop recharged Meg’s enthusiasm for social justice
education, and she brought back several resource packets to share with members of the CoP. Using resources from the workshop, Meg and I planned and delivered a professional learning session for all Wood Valley Middle School faculty and staff about speaking up against biased language. In this professional learning session, we shared ways that teachers can interrupt and educate students and adults on the ways biased language can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices and make people feel unsafe or unwelcome in the school community (Teaching Tolerance, n.d.a).

Three participants—Meg, Nancy, and I—joined approximately 12 other staff members at Wood Valley Middle School in establishing a book club for people interested in equity in education. Meg said she was excited about how people from the CoP were able to join with others to continue exploring diversity and equity after the research ended. She realized that there were many other people at the school who were interested in improving education for all students, but they had been working “in their own little silos”. She commented, “Now we’re just making all of those connections so that all these little silos like come together . . . sort of like the start of a movement almost.” Joining this new book club helped Meg, Nancy, and me feel like we were part of a bigger community that valued diversity and wanted to make education more culturally responsive and equitable.

These examples show that the increased awareness participants developed through critical reflection in the CoP facilitated change and inspired them to take steps to learn more about cultural diversity, share that information with others, and expand their
learning communities. The next section describes how teachers also found ways to make specific changes to their practices.

*Making changes to teaching practice.* As a result of participating in the CoP, several participants made immediate changes to their teaching practice. Many teachers mentioned that they were making a more conscious effort to learn about their students’ backgrounds and cultures. Others began focusing on finding ways to make connections with students to build stronger interpersonal relationships. Meg noted, “As soon as I get to know them a little bit, I feel like everything is easier.”

Leigh shared a strategy for relating to students, “One of the easiest and best ways I connect is through sports. I can talk about the teams I follow and sports that I play and compare my experience with their games.”

Many members of the CoP shared Jayne’s sentiment that strong relationships can help teachers overcome racial, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences that separate them from their students. Jayne claimed that if students know a teacher cares about them, believes in them, and will stand up for them, “then many of those barriers are no longer barriers”. Participants frequently spoke about the importance of these connections and began putting more effort into developing stronger relationships with their students.

Teachers in the study also started to consider cultural differences when planning instruction. For example, Meg stated, “I’ve found that when I plan my classes, I’m thinking about the cultural experiences of my students and how I can incorporate those
backgrounds or personal stories into my lessons.” Similarly, Dominique said she started to “tweak” course materials to ensure they were culturally relevant for her students.

Heidi realized that she needed to deconstruct the idea of what was “normal” school behavior and be more explicit when setting expectations for her students. She said, “There are things that I won’t take for granted as far as instruction is concerned and maybe classroom management. . . . Things that we just think are ‘normal’ quote, unquote. . . . That it’s not normal for everybody.” Based on this new understanding, Heidi believed it was important to be clear and comprehensive when explaining directions for activities in the science lab or providing rationales for learning objectives. These examples show that participants were making changes to their pedagogical practices based on their experience in the CoP.

Although every participant acknowledged some degree of transformation related to their participation in the CoP, two participants—Lucy and Jasmine—exhibited more dramatic transformations than the others. Lucy experienced a revelation about how she overemphasized course content at the expense of building relationships with students, and she acquired more inclusive teaching materials and developed new lessons for the upcoming school year. Jasmine experienced a fundamental change to her philosophical approach to teaching and made specific changes to a project to make it more culturally responsive.

Lucy’s first significant transformation was a result of discussions she had in CoP meetings and a conversation with her daughter. In the first few meetings, several
teachers talked about the importance of sharing information about their own lives and experiences to help students see them as human and relatable. Lucy admitted that she never showed her emotions in class and never told stories about her life because she believed that she should dedicate every minute of class to instruction, and personal discussions were a waste of time. In the third meeting, Lucy told the group that the previous night her daughter was talking about her favorite teacher. When Lucy asked what made that teacher her favorite, her daughter said that the teacher had recently celebrated an anniversary and shared pictures of her wedding with the class. Lucy’s daughter felt connected with the teacher on a personal level, which made Lucy realize how she did not make space for those types of connections with her own students. As Lucy related the story to the CoP, she started crying and struggled to say, “I never had that. I never do that with my kids. I never shared a story. I don’t want to waste any time. And I saw how excited [my daughter] was telling me about her teacher. It’s so important.” Lucy’s daughter’s comments about what made a teacher relatable and lovable along with what other members of the CoP said about connecting with students helped Lucy realize that her impersonal approach was creating a barrier between her and students. It was a painful realization because she had maintained this emotional distance from her students for more than 20 years. Even though she admitted change was difficult for her, she said she wanted to build better relationships with students by being open, sharing aspects of her personal life, and making more of an effort to learn about students’ backgrounds. In the last few weeks of the study, Lucy reported several instances in
which she talked with students about their cultural backgrounds and tried to relate with students on a more personal level.

Lucy also took steps to make her lessons and teaching materials more culturally responsive and inclusive of different perspectives. She realized that she was not presenting her students with a full picture of the Spanish-speaking world, so she found new resources representing a wider range of Hispanic families from various socioeconomic groups. She also realized that the materials she used primarily focused on Mexico, Spain, and Argentina, so she decided to dedicate more time to what she called the “little countries” and provide information about the indigenous populations of Latin America. Lucy was enthusiastic about starting the new school year with what she believed were more engaging and inclusive lessons.

In the first interview, Jasmine captured the extent of her transformation when she said, “It’s like oh my gosh! A caterpillar to butterfly. I’m like somebody else right now.” She believed her experience reflecting on cultural identity in the CoP dramatically changed her perspectives. Early on she realized that the colorblind philosophy that had guided her teaching practice was insensitive, and later she took specific actions to change her lessons and approach to working with diverse students.

In her first journal entry, Jasmine wrote, “I am beginning to wonder if the teacher who says, ‘When I look at my students, I don’t see color . . . I don’t see girl/boy, male/female . . . I don’t see class . . .’ is unintentionally doing our students a disservice.” Her experience exploring her own identity and talking about culture within the CoP, even
after just one meeting, made Jasmine start questioning and critiquing her beliefs. By the third meeting, she had changed her perspective and claimed, “I feel like . . . you definitely should be seeing someone’s color. And I’ve always looked at that as like a negative thing, but this has given me kind of a different outlook.” By the end of the study, Jasmine realized that by not recognizing the full complement of people’s identity, she was being disrespectful and dismissive of who they are as complex human beings. She became aware that this new understanding would cause her to change a long-held habit of mind. She explained why she would abandon her colorblind perspective, “I’m 50, and I thought my entire life that that is fair. . . . And so, the biggest, I think, hurdle that I have crossed is . . . that seeing them is what is what stops you from being biased.” Jasmine came to understand that seeing difference is not being prejudiced; rather, acknowledging diversity is fair and equitable.

Participating in the CoP for eight weeks caused Jasmine to transform her belief about acknowledging human differences, and it also led to specific changes in her teaching practice. During the study, Jasmine had a transformational moment when one of her students asked if he could turn in part of an English assignment in Spanish. Students had to create a soundtrack of their lives by finding songs thematically connected to their experiences, childhood memories, and emotions. One Latino student wanted to include lyrics in Spanish. Jasmine admitted her initial reaction was to say no because she would not be able to read the lyrics and, therefore, would be unable to evaluate the assignment. However, she exclaimed, “Then the Jasmine who’s been attending the [CoP] appeared
and thought: How can you put limits on his story, his experiences, his connections??!!”

She arranged for the student to submit the assignment with Spanish lyrics and translate them into English “so that the project would have the [same] level of authenticity” as it did for other students. Reflecting on cultural identity in the CoP made Jasmine more aware of the power she had in the role of teacher to affirm or deny students’ identities. She chose to be more culturally responsive and allow students to use all their cultural and linguistic resources to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. From this experience, Jasmine concluded, “There is so much to consider as we search to find a medium for our students . . . a place where no one gets lost and there is room to celebrate our many differences as we learn.” Her experiences in the CoP helped Jasmine understand how to modify not only this one assignment but also how to incorporate her new perspectives into her overall approach to teaching.

Jasmine declared that becoming more culturally responsive had become a personal goal. She asked, “Now that I truly know better, how do I do better?” Instead of being the strict, no-nonsense teacher who does not smile until Christmas, Jasmine said she was planning to start the next school year with “a softer, more empathetic approach”. This would be a radical change for her. She claimed, “It is totally against who I am, or who I’ve been for 20 years. But that is the impact that the study had on me.” Jasmine admitted that her participation in the CoP pushed her out of her “comfort zone”. It made her see herself, her colleagues, and her students in new ways, and it resulted in dramatic transformations to her teaching practice.
Teachers’ Experience of Critical Reflection

The previous sections of this chapter provide a detailed answer to the primary research question guiding this study: What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities? The next two sections report findings related to the research subquestions. The first subquestion was: How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with CLD students?

The teachers in this study reported positive feelings about their experience engaging in the CoP. They also demonstrated preferences for certain modes of engagement and reflection over others, experienced some hindrances to reflection, and identified challenges to being a reflective practitioner. The data also show that some participants experienced critical reflection on culture, identity, and diversity as an extension of preexisting interests, whereas others experienced it as more of a new undertaking.

Positive Views of Experience in the Community of Practice

All participants reported positive feelings about their participation in the CoP and acknowledged that the experience encouraged them to be more reflective than they might have been otherwise. For example, Jayne stated, “It was good to hear other people’s perspectives.” She appreciated the opportunity to interrogate her own points of view by juxtaposing them with those of colleagues who agreed and disagreed with her.
Jasmine said the CoP afforded her an opportunity to see her colleagues “through a completely different lens” and “learn about a myriad of cultural differences and biases”. She also appreciated that “an extremely diverse group of women who at first glance might appear not to have any experiences, outlooks, beliefs, opinions, or perceptions that might benefit the others” were able to come together and “teach and learn from each other”. Jasmine saw the collaboration among participants as evidence that discussing issues of culture, race, and identity with a group of people from diverse backgrounds can be an enriching experience.

Participants also identified specific benefits of the critical reflection they experienced in the CoP. Leigh believed it was valuable for her as a White person to engage in discussions about privilege and discrimination with a diverse group of people representing different perspectives. She explained, “Hearing my peers talk, I realized how much they deal with—those who are of color or outside of the mainstream. And then how much that probably does affect our [students].” By listening to her colleagues talk about their own experiences with prejudice and discrimination, Leigh gained a greater appreciation for their experiences, and she was able to relate what she learned to the lives of her diverse students.

Seeing the value of critical reflection on identity for teachers, Meg stated, “It was great to sort of have that opportunity to think . . . about how . . . my identity impact[s] the way that I see my students as opposed to just how do I identify myself.”
Nancy said that she benefited from watching participants interact with one another: “It makes me think about things I do in my class and also how my students may or may not view me”.

After completing activities that encouraged them to reflect on their own cultural identities, teachers in this study frequently and quickly directed the discussion toward their teaching practice. Teachers related the reflection activities and discussions to novels and lessons they were teaching in class, specific interactions they have had with students and parents, and culturally-based misunderstandings or problems they had experienced in the classroom.

Overall, participants viewed their experience in the CoP positively. When asked what it had been like for her to reflect critically on cultural identity and personal biases, Nancy admitted, “I think I’ve been wanting to have an opportunity to talk about this.” She explained that opportunities for these types of discussions are rare: “We just normally don’t take the time for the conversation”. She felt the experience was beneficial and remarked, “It’s groups like this that do change the world!”

Preferences for Modes of Reflection

Participants in this study had multiple options for engaging in reflection. Group meetings and interviews gave teachers opportunities to engage in face-to-face discussions. The critical reflective journals provided a way for participants to capture their thoughts each week by typing in an electronic document shared with the researcher. Teachers also participated in a group text thread using an app on their cellphones.
Individual participants demonstrated preferences for certain modes of reflection more than others. Several participants expressed a preference for talking, either in meetings or during interviews, as the best way for them to process and share their thinking rather than writing or texting. They preferred the immediacy of the face-to-face human interactions and enjoyed working in a collaborative group. For example, Lucy commented, “My favorite part of it is the talking”, and she acknowledged that she learns best through social interactions.

Jasmine noted, “The discussions allowed me to hear the perspectives of others [and] deepened my understanding of them.” These examples indicate participants viewed group discussions as essential for critical reflection and an important part of their learning within the CoP.

Participants also provided feedback on the structure of dialogue during meetings. Meg commented, “I like that our sessions incorporate both structured conversation/reflection and more organic conversation. . . . At the same time, I love that we have the flexibility to change our conversation based on the experiences that each individual brings.” Meg appreciated both structured and more free-flowing discussions. Jayne suggested that dividing the CoP into partners or triads to discuss issues might have given more individuals time to talk than working as a whole group.

When teachers attended the meetings, they were physically and mentally present and engaged in discussions; however, they admitted that finding time to write journals or participate in the text thread outside of weekly meeting times was often challenging.
Lucy described it this way: “I like[d] the group discussions, handouts and activities. My least favorite assignment was the journaling because sometimes I did not have enough time to complete it, and also I felt like I was in school again.” These teachers had busy personal and professional lives, and they sometimes needed email prompts from me to remind them to complete the weekly reflective journals.

The quantity and quality of the written journal entries also varied. Some teachers were more reflective and productive in their journal writing than others. A few, like Dominique and Nancy, wrote very little but talked a great deal during meetings. Others, like Jasmine, Jayne, and Meg wrote a greater number of words and included more profound comments and questions in their written reflections. These participants were more contemplative and introspective in their writing than some of the others were. Jasmine noted that writing after the group meetings “allowed time for [her] to process [her] thoughts and digest the thoughts of the other”. She frequently used her journal to ask questions that arose from her experience in the CoP. For example, acknowledging the emotions surrounding discussions of race, religion, and politics, Jayne posed questions about how people can listen to and really understand perspectives that drastically differ from their own while maintaining respect for the people who hold those opposing views. About race she asked, “Our issues are so much deeper and more complicated than skin color, but how can we see them with clarity?” Jayne’s questions show she continued to think about the topics after the face-to-face meetings were over and that she recognized the complexity of issues surrounding diversity.
Participants shared their written journals only with me, the researcher. However, I quickly realized that some comments participants were writing would be valuable for generating deeper discussions in the face-to-face meetings, so with participants’ permission, I selected excerpts from each week’s journals to share at the next meeting. Participants enjoyed reading what others had written and appreciated seeing how other people were processing the thoughts and feelings they experienced while reflecting on identity, diversity, and teaching practice. Meg noted, “One of my favorite elements of our conversations is the opportunity to see excerpts from everyone’s journals. I’ve been amazed to read my own thoughts and feelings more eloquently reflected in others’ journals.”

This method of sharing journal excerpts at face-to-face meetings served multiple purposes. First, it provided a way to make the thinking of individual participants visible to other members of the group. Second, by strategically selecting examples of deeper thinking, I was able to provide models of critical reflection for participants who were writing less thoughtful responses in their journals. Third, it created a mechanism for building continuity from week to week. Reading what others wrote about the previous week’s discussion helped participants reexamine and delve a bit deeper into areas of interest rather than starting with completely new topics each week.

In contrast to the vibrant nature of group discussions and the weekly completion of journal entries, the texting phase of the study was less productive than expected. For approximately two and a half weeks in the middle of the study, participants received a
daily text message via WhatsApp asking how they experienced diversity or aspects of cultural identity during that particular school day. This was a group text thread, so all members of the CoP could see everyone’s posts and replies. Aside from the daily solicitations from me, participants contributed approximately 45 messages to the text thread. Meg, Serah, and I were the ones who engaged most often on WhatsApp. Dominique, Jasmine, Lucy, and Leigh wrote a few messages, but Jayne, Nancy, and Heidi did not participate at all. Table 15 (included earlier in this chapter) shows the exact number of responses written by each participant.

Several participants were familiar with the application before the study, and they used it frequently to communicate with family and friends. Others had little or no experience using WhatsApp, so that may have been one factor that contributed to its limited use. Some participants attributed their lack of participation in the text thread to personal preferences about using technology. For example, Heidi said, “I am not a phone person” and talked about how her friends, family, and coworkers often found that frustrating.

Similarly, Leigh expressed a distaste for “talking with [her] thumbs”. Others said they had difficulties with settings in the app and did not receive notifications when other people posted new messages. A few teachers also mentioned they just never developed the habit of looking at or responding to the text thread. Despite these complications, some participants were able to capture rich examples of their experiences with diversity
and share them with the CoP in the group text thread. This mode of communication also provided a way for group members to interact outside of face-to-face meeting times.

Hindrances to Reflection

Participants in this study experienced some hindrances to critical reflection. These included early reservations about the process, the nature of their relationships with other group members, wanting more time to explore topics in depth, and finding the right words to express themselves.

Teachers experienced some initial skepticism about engaging with a group of colleagues to critically reflect on cultural identity. Although I took great care in designing the study, selecting participants, and organizing the meetings and materials, before the first meeting, I, too, was nervous about how things would go. I was not sure if people would be open and willing to talk about their beliefs and personal experiences. Other participants shared similar feelings of nervousness, hesitation, and skepticism and wrote about them in their journals. After the first meeting, Nancy commented, “I wasn’t sure if I would be comfortable discussing such topics within a group of my colleagues, but I think it’s going to be okay.”

Meg confessed, “If I’m really honest, I did not expect to have a diverse cultural conversation.”

As time went on, participants became more trusting and comfortable with one another. After the second meeting Dominique wrote, “In the beginning I was a little reluctant to talk about my experience, even when the rules and expectations were set and
discussed. Now I feel more comfortable.” These comments and the extent to which participants were open and honest about their feelings and experiences show that they were able to overcome their early reservations.

As mentioned earlier, all the participants in the study knew each other in some capacity prior to the study because they all worked at the same school. Some people were merely work acquaintances. Some were more familiar with each other because they taught in the same grade or department or even co-taught with one another. A few were friends outside of work. The nature of these relationships may have contributed to the experience of critical reflection for some participants. For example, Serah talked about the pros and cons of knowing the other participants. Acknowledging that her participation in the CoP was an emotional process, she said, “I am mostly myself when I am open and vulnerable, but it was challenging to be so open amongst colleagues that I do not consider to be my friend.”

In contrast, Serah also viewed her previous relationships with other participants as a barrier. She commented, “It was a little uncomfortable that I knew the people. . . . Not wanting to talk about certain things with certain people was a thing. Even with my dear friend Nancy, that I love, it is difficult for me to have certain conversations with her.” Serah explained that she tried to avoid conversations about race with Nancy based on a previous discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement that did not go well. Serah’s comments show that she felt more comfortable talking about contentious issues
with people she considered friends, but she also pointed out that sometimes even friends find it difficult to engage in debates about race, culture, identity, and prejudices.

Nancy also mentioned being cautious in discussing these issues in the CoP. She said, “The last . . . thing I wanted to do was offend any of [the other members] and not have time to repair it.” She said that the hour-long meetings and limited timeframe of the study made her hesitant to bring up more sensitive topics because she did not want to damage her relationships with the other members.

Several members mentioned wanting the CoP to continue meeting for a longer period to facilitate deeper discussions. For example, Heidi commented, “A lot of the first beginnings were just us getting to know each other.” She believed that it would require “longer session[s] and more weeks” to “dive even deeper” into the topics of culture, identity, and diversity.

Nancy shared similar concerns and recognized that six meetings in eight weeks was not enough time “to explore the darker” issues surrounding race, culture, and diversity. Her comments about staying cautious and being respectful of one another also suggest that she and perhaps others avoided confrontations within the CoP. Nancy believed that with more time participants might have broached more difficult topics because they would have had the opportunity to work through conflict at future meetings. There was a consensus that extending the length of the study would have provided members of the CoP additional opportunities to engage in deeper levels of critical reflection.
At times, participants struggled to find the right words to express their thoughts and feelings. They often repeated words and phrases as they searched for the best way to articulate their ideas. They frequently used “sort of”, “kind of”, “you know”, and “like” as a form of prevarication or to soften or ameliorate comments they thought might be contentious or uncomfortable for themselves or others. Participants sometimes stopped speaking and took extra time to formulate their remarks more carefully. For example, when answering a question about whether her experience in the CoP might affect her teaching, Meg said, “Well, let me start. . . . Okay, I’m gonna take a second to organize my thoughts here”, after which she paused for approximately five seconds before answering.

When asked a similar question, Serah paused for nearly 10 seconds before responding, “I’m trying to see how I can say this. . . .” These examples show that participants were being thoughtful with their responses and that clearly articulating their beliefs about their experience with critical reflection in the CoP was a difficult task.

Challenges of Being a Reflective Teacher

Over the course of the study, participants began to realize that being a critically reflective teacher was a demanding undertaking. Teachers talked about the time and energy it takes to work on cultural competence. Serah said, “I’ve noticed that it’s all very exhausting. . . . thinking about, being conscious of, being aware of. . . . culture, identity, and diversity. It’s exhausting and yet necessary for small changes to take place.”
Similarly, Meg commented, “I’ve realized that the constant awareness takes energy. This is energy that I seem to have in more plentiful amounts earlier in the week and earlier in the day.”

These teachers recognized that maintaining awareness of the influence of cultural identity on their practice is a challenging task that requires patience, effort, and a willingness to break old habits of mind. Jasmine explained, “I’ve been doing this [teaching] for a long time, so it doesn’t happen without effort. You know, it’s not natural. It’s, it’s, it’s something that I’m learning.” She recognized that to create equitable and culturally responsive opportunities for all students to learn she will have to “come out of [her] comfort zone”.

Serah also admitted that making her classroom more welcoming for all students, especially ELs, required her to make changes in her practice and to her classroom environment. She said, “I don’t like all that’s coming from it. I don’t like the noise levels I have to deal with now. I don’t like having to repeat myself. . . . So there are definitely things that test me as a person.” Jasmine and Serah’s willingness to experience personal discomfort to make their teaching practices more inclusive and supportive of diverse learners is a sign of personal and professional transformation that was a result of their own critical reflection.

Several participants also mentioned that the ever-increasing demands put on public school teachers leave little time for learning about students’ backgrounds and developing strong relationships with them. Nancy talked about how the paperwork she
has to do as a special education teacher often distracted her from focusing on students’ cultural identities. Jayne mentioned that she never had the time to learn as much as she would like about her EL students and their prior life experiences. I wrote in my journal about the lack of time I had to devote to learning about my students: “I regret that being knowledgeable about racial and ethnic minority groups seems like something ‘extra.’ I feel like it should be an integral part of knowing my students and preparing lessons that meet their needs”. It is difficult for teachers to find time to develop a full understanding of their students as cultural beings. Participants in this study expressed the desire to learn about students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they admitted they struggle to find time to do so.

Despite these challenges, teachers believed that being more reflective about cultural differences would benefit students and improve their teaching practice. Members of this CoP engaged in critical reflection in various ways depending on their personal preferences and life experiences. One important factor that influenced how these teachers participated in critical reflection was whether they had previous experience contemplating cultural differences or equity in education.

Critical Reflection as an Extension of a Preexisting Interest or as a New Endeavor

Teachers’ experienced critical reflection in this study in different ways. For some participants, the experience of examining and critiquing their assumptions and biases was an extension of a preexisting interest in cultural differences and equitable education. For
others, engaging in this type of critical reflection on culture, identity, and diversity was more of a novel experience.

Six of the 10 participants in the study mentioned prior experiences in which they intentionally examined the role of culture, identity, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity in their personal or professional lives. For example, Dominique and Heidi were born outside the United States, and English was not their first language. They shared examples of times in their lives where this forced them to be more conscious of cultural and linguistic differences. Others like Jayne, Meg, and Serah mentioned exploring issues of difference in connection with their personal relationships or work they had done in their faith communities. My own experiences teaching students from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and researching the role of cultural identity on teaching practice had increased my awareness of diversity. The comments these six teachers made in meetings, interviews, and journals were often more critical in nature than those made by the other four participants, and frequently they were associated with their previous experiences exploring issues related to cultural diversity. Table 17 provides an overview of how these six participants perceived critical reflection in the CoP as an extension of a prior interest in culture, identity, or diversity. These teachers indicated that participating in the CoP and engaging in critical reflection in a collaborative setting helped them move further along in their journey toward cultural competence.
### Table 17

**Participants Experiencing Critical Reflection as Extension of a Preexisting Interest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Examples of Previous Experience/Interest</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>Born and raised in the Ivory Coast. Has lived in the United States for 28 years. As a well-educated Black African, she sometimes identifies more closely with White people in this country than with African-Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Born in Germany and her first language is German. She has lived in the United States since age five and is perceived as a White “American.” She said this gives her insights into the cultural and linguistic differences of students with similar experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne</td>
<td>She has explored transculturalism through involvement with her church and recently married outside her own race. “Cultural bias is something that I’ve been delving into my personal life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet*</td>
<td>“As an ESOL teacher and a doctoral student studying diversity and multicultural education, I have a heightened awareness of cultural and linguistic issues especially in the public school environment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>Before participating in the study, she had been teaching Sunday school lessons that centered on identity. “I go to a very progressive church and our whole curriculum for middle school Sunday school was about identity, and justice, and you know all of those different ways that we can impact the world around us and that we can identify ourselves.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah</td>
<td>She identified herself as a reflective person and said, “I feel that I have been ‘othered’ so often in my life that my identity has been defined (and accepted) by my need to fit into a larger context in the world. If I am an ‘other’ (i.e. Black, woman, queer, southern) then I am somehow less than and have to work extra hard in order to be given certain advances in life. This feels like a truth to me and it makes it difficult to find this world a safe, fair, and just place.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * denotes researcher

Four of the 10 participants in the study were less familiar with the process of critical reflection on cultural identity because they lacked the same opportunities to explicitly examine their biases and interrogate their assumptions about human differences. However, within the context of the CoP, these participants gained
experience through the collaborative exploration of different perspectives and by questioning their own long-held beliefs. Two participants in particular, Jasmine and Lucy, embraced the experience, fully engaged in critical reflection, and showed notable transformations (see Table 18). Leigh and Nancy were open to and engaged in the process but demonstrated more limited critical reflection and fewer expressions of change (see Table 19).

Table 18

*Participants Experiencing Critical Reflection as a New Endeavor on a Dramatic Level*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Demonstrating Dramatic Levels of Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>“This focus group has pushed me beyond what I thought was possible especially given the timeframe. It is fair for me to say that I have grown more in these eight weeks than I’ve done over the course of a school year . . . or two.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• She abandoned her colorblind philosophy for teaching and adopted a more culturally responsive approach. She modified an assignment to allow a student to submit part of it in Spanish instead of English. She planned to make significant changes to her teaching practice in the next school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>“The more I have learned about myself, my cultural identity and personal biases, the more I can see and improve myself when I am teaching. It will definitely help me to be more respectful and fair to my students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• She made immediate changes to her relational approach with students. She found new resources and developed new lesson plans to better address diversity in her classroom for the next school year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 19

Participants Experiencing Critical Reflection as a New Endeavor on a Subtle Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Demonstrating Subtle Levels of Transformation</th>
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</table>
| Leigh       | • Critical reflection helped her to be more conscious of her own perspectives as a White middle class woman. She said the CoP helped her develop “a little echo chamber ... in [her] brain to hear what [she’s] saying,” and it encouraged her to make more of an effort to consider the perspectives of her students.  
  • Throughout the study, she remained more focused on learning teaching and management strategies than gaining specific insights into culture, identity, and diversity. |
| Nancy       | • She said that she would be more conscious of cultural differences among students, but she was unconvinced of the value that may have in her special education classroom.  
  • She said, “Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I’ll let you know about that later. Because it’s gonna be interesting to see if that slows me up a little bit.” |

Factors Influencing the Degree of Transformations

The extent to which participants expressed empathy and demonstrated a desire to make changes to their teaching practice influenced the degree of transformations they showed as a result of participating in the CoP. All participants experienced some form of transformation ranging from subtle to dramatic. Figure 7 shows how participants who frequently or vehemently expressed a desire to make changes to their teaching practice and more often articulated expressions of empathy made more dramatic transformations. Participants who showed less interest in making their teaching practice more culturally responsive and expressed empathy less often showed transformations that were more subtle. The three participants who made the most dramatic transformations were Jasmine, Lucy, and Meg.
Figure 7. Factors influencing the degree of transformation. This model shows the extent to which participants expressed a desire to change and exhibited empathy. Bolder arrows show a stronger or more frequent articulation of these concepts, and thinner arrows show weaker or less frequent articulation. Participants who had a stronger desire to change and had greater expressions of empathy made more dramatic transformations.

Empathy is one factor that influenced teachers’ transformations in this study. *Empathy* is “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, n.d.c) person without being explicitly told what those feelings, thoughts, and experiences are. Although Dominique, Leigh, Nancy, and Serah demonstrated that they were caring, kind, and concerned educators, they did not express empathy for others to the extent that Jasmine and Lucy did.
Jasmine spoke specifically about empathizing with students whose parents did not speak English and therefore might be less able to help with homework, with colleagues who might be experiencing difficulties in their lives outside of school, and with people in same-sex relationships who encountered prejudice. In one of her critical reflection journals, Jasmine wrote, “It is my hope that as we evolve, we develop our ability to empathize with those who are different: racially, culturally, sexually, physically, intellectually, emotionally, etc.” She viewed empathy as a tool for becoming more accepting and appreciative of differences.

Lucy also demonstrated a high level of empathy during the study. After acknowledging the influence of her own faith on her cultural identity, she started having conversations with students of other faiths in an effort to better understand their religious perspectives. After hearing Serah talk about the pain and prejudice she experiences as a lesbian, Lucy articulated a new understanding of the judgement and suffering homosexuals experience. Participating in the CoP also helped Lucy recognize the extent to which her own perspectives on gender influence her teaching practice and enabled her to develop greater empathy for transgender students. She described one incident in which she used gender-biased language in class and later apologized to a transgender student.

In addition to showing empathy, Jasmine, Lucy, and Meg more frequently expressed a desire to change their perspectives and approaches to teaching than did the other participants in the study. As described earlier in this chapter, Jasmine enthusiastically spoke about changing her beliefs about the role of race, ethnicity, and
language in the classroom. Lucy vowed to share more of herself with her students and procured new teaching resources to make her lessons more culturally responsive. Of the six teachers who had more experience reflecting on cultural identity and diversity, Meg was the one who showed the greatest interest in making her practice more culturally responsive. For example, Meg said, “My sense of responsibility regarding cultural responsivity has changed.” She wanted to be more vocal about how much she values diversity, and she wanted to set an example for students and teachers about how embracing difference can be an enriching experience. Meg said that participating in the CoP made her more conscious of differences beyond race that impact her teaching and acknowledged that she had much work to do to improve her skills in those areas. Meg went beyond simply desiring to change; she took immediate action to make her practice more culturally responsive. These examples show that more empathy and a greater desire to change led to more dramatic transformations for teachers in this study.

For Jasmine and Lucy, the experience of critically reflecting on cultural identity was a relatively new experience, yet they demonstrated remarkable changes in perspectives. One characteristic that may have contributed to their transformations was they both had clearly defined and fixed ideas about the kind of teacher they believed themselves to be. Jasmine saw herself as a stern, demanding, colorblind teacher. Lucy’s teacher identity was strict, academically rigorous, and personally distant. Other teachers in the study described themselves as more changeable and admitted their practices frequently evolved. It is possible that participation in the CoP created a situation in
which Jasmine and Lucy started to question their fixed ideas about their identities as teachers. Perhaps learning more about their own cultures, beliefs, and biases and engaging in dialogue with people holding different perspectives were disorienting experiences that challenged Jasmine and Lucy’s carefully constructed and long-held identities, and, in turn, led them to make more dramatic transformations.

In summary, teachers in this study experienced critical reflection within the CoP as a positive and beneficial undertaking. In general, participants demonstrated a preference for reflecting in group discussions, but some members wrote introspective and critical entries in their journals. Participants identified hindrances to reflection that included reservations about discussing potentially controversial issues with colleagues, difficulties expressing their thoughts and feelings clearly, and the short timeframe of the study. The teachers also recognized that becoming a reflective practitioner is a challenge that requires a great deal of time, energy, and patience. Many participants experienced critical reflection on cultural identity and personal bias as an extension of work they had done in other areas of their lives although for others it was more of a new endeavor. Finally, participants who expressed more empathy and exhibited a greater desire to change made more dramatic transformations during the study than teachers who showed fewer examples of these traits. The next section offers a discussion of participants’ beliefs about how their participation in the CoP may affect their teaching practice.
Beliefs About the Effects of the Community of Practice on Teaching

The second supporting research question for this study was: How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their teaching practice with CLD students? It is not possible to observe beliefs directly, so researchers must make inferences from people’s comments, intentions, and actions to speculate about what someone believes (Pajares, 1992). To generate an answer to this research question, I examined what teachers said and did, and I also compared how they responded to the Teacher Beliefs Inventory (Appendix B) at the beginning and end of the study. Additionally, in the two rounds of interviews, I explicitly asked teachers if and how they thought their experience in the CoP may have an impact on their teaching practice.

Results of the Teacher Beliefs Inventory

Participants in this study took a survey once at the beginning of the first face-to-face meeting and again eight weeks later after the last meeting. The instrument was the Teacher Beliefs Inventory: The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (Spanierman et al., 2011). This survey was designed to assess how pre- and in-service teachers rate their knowledge about and skills for multicultural teaching. As Table 20 shows, most participants self-reported an increase in multicultural teaching skill and knowledge at the end of the study. Six participants showed an increase in multicultural teaching skill ranging from 11 to 17 percentage points, and seven participants reported an increase of 3 to 20 percentage points in multicultural teaching knowledge.
Table 20

Results of the Teacher Beliefs Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>End</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet*</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne Bishop</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh Tennison</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Reyes</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg Donovan</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Skyland</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serah Abrams**</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(^a\)denotes percentage points; *denotes researcher; ** denotes participant who joined late and only took survey at the end of study.

When asked if they thought these results accurately reflected their experience over the course of the study, participants said the numbers seemed like a true representation of how the CoP helped them improve their knowledge of diversity and their skills for working with diverse students. Specifically, teachers attributed their growth to learning in a collaborative social environment. Participants said conversations with colleagues about cultural identity and differences led to increased awareness of diversity in their teaching practices.

Lucy indicated that she thought her scores at the beginning should have been lower because she realized during the study that she did not know or do as much as she should to address diversity. Leigh stated that participating in the CoP helped her become
more cognizant of cultural identity and diversity issues in general, and the weekly meetings made her more aware of the influence these factors had on her daily interactions with students. She believed that having conversations with colleagues in the meetings had a positive effect on what she did, said, and thought during the school day.

Ironically, those participants showing a decrease attributed their lowered score to an increase in awareness of issues surrounding cultural diversity. In other words, they rated their skills and/or knowledge about working with diverse students lower at the end because they realized they did not know as much about cultural differences as the they thought they did prior to the study. For example, Nancy said, “I just didn’t know what I didn’t know.” These teachers said that their scores went down because participating in the study made them realize how much they were not addressing diversity in their practice.

In fact, Meg thought her scores should have gone down even further at the end because participating in the CoP made her realize she had much more to learn. She explained, “At the beginning, I thought I was doing a pretty good job. And now I . . . think I’m doing a pretty good job, but because I know more, I have more . . . room for improvement.” Meg recognized that becoming a culturally responsive teacher takes considerable time and effort, and during and after the study she took actions to improve her knowledge and skills in this regard.

Teachers’ responses to the Teacher Beliefs Inventory at the beginning and end of the study provided valuable insight into their views of their own multicultural teaching
skills and knowledge. Asking participants about their survey results in the second interview provided them with an opportunity to reflect on and interpret the effects of their overall experience in the CoP. It also provided a way to member check the results of a self-reported assessment. The participants interpreted their survey results and provided context for changes in their multicultural teaching skill and knowledge. In general, teachers believed that they experienced significant growth as a result of participating in the CoP. The following section includes specific comments participants made about how they believe the experience influenced their teaching practice.

Comments about Change in Practice

As teachers in this study developed new understandings about cultural identity and its impact on education, they started to see new and expanded possibilities for addressing diversity issues, they took actions to increase their cultural competence, and they made specific changes to their teaching practices. This section provides an overview of teachers’ beliefs about the effects of participating in the CoP.

Several teachers mentioned that their experience of reflecting critically on their own cultural identity and assumptions helped them realize that they needed to make changes to their instructional practices and in how they related to students. In her first interview, Jasmine talked about how her pedagogical approach throughout her 23-year teaching career was based on her own experiences in private Catholic schools where everyone was treated the same and there was no differentiation or acknowledgment of individual differences or needs. She said that discussing cultural differences in the CoP
made her realize how unfair and even harmful that approach can be. Jasmine stated, “It’s so crazy because I’m having to unlearn everything that I’ve learned. My experience in education as a student is probably everything that I would not want to do as a teacher.” Through critical reflection on her own experience, Jasmine came to understand that her traditional teaching methods were not culturally responsive, and she wanted to make changes to be more considerate and inclusive of students’ differences.

In that interview with Jasmine, I also acknowledged, “I taught from what I knew, and I taught from my own experience. And what we’re talking about is [students] have experiences too. And somehow or another we’ve all got to take that into account.” Jasmine and I both believed that including more diverse student perspectives and making our classrooms more culturally relevant and responsive would improve our teaching practices, but this would require breaking old habits and making intentional changes.

Other participants believed that the increased awareness of cultural differences they developed during the study helped them be more conscious of how their own biases and perspectives influenced the work they do as teachers. For example, Lucy mentioned that she had become more cognizant of how stereotypical gender roles surfaced in her comments to students, and after participating in the CoP, she was better able to recognize her biases. She explained, “I can now catch myself and realize that this is not good to say.”

Serah also stated that her experience reflecting on linguistic and cultural differences resulted in a greater awareness of her word choice and behaviors in the
classroom. Admitting that change takes time, she noted, “There are going to be things that I say or do that I’m not really aware of. But once I am aware of them, I try to make corrections.” Serah saw awareness as a first step and indicated a desire to make changes based on new learning she experienced in the CoP.

Some teachers indicated that participating in the CoP changed how they thought about cultural identity in relation to their work with diverse students. For example, Jayne said the experience made her think more about factors beyond race that can influence teaching and learning. She stated, “I think a lot about racial issues and racial dynamics in the classroom . . . but the other things probably not as much.” She claimed there might be “more things about other aspects of who I am that I would look more into, lean more into now”. After participating in the study and discussing aspects of identity beyond race, Jayne felt these issues deserved further exploration.

Meg also stated that exploring her own identity and engaging in conversations with other teachers about cross-cultural interactions changed her thinking. She said, “There are things that I feel differently about now than I did three months ago.” Meg believed that participating in the CoP helped her develop new priorities for setting expectations in her classroom. She was adamant about making sure her students knew that biased language and intolerant attitudes were unacceptable, and she believed it was her responsibility to support students in meeting these expectations. Meg explained, “I also want them to see someone modeling, like how to be more culturally responsive, or how to be more open to experiences. And sort of the joy and riches that can bring to your
own life.” These comments show that Meg believed teachers could influence student learning beyond content mastery; she saw herself as a change agent who could help students cultivate inclusive perspectives that would enrich their lives.

Many participants were enthusiastic about making changes in the upcoming school year. They believed their experience in the study would result in positive changes in their teaching practice. Lucy exclaimed, “I’m very excited about starting a new year, with all of these new ideas.” She said that being in the group helped her realize that she needed “to be more open” and step out of her comfort zone to try new approaches and use more culturally responsive materials in her classes.

Leigh resolved to get to know her students better and make more of an effort “to know what’s going on in their background”. She came to understand that developing a better understanding of students’ home lives and cultural backgrounds was essential to building strong relationships.

In her last journal, Jasmine wrote, “I am looking forward to reflecting on all that I have learned throughout this process and implementing lessons with my students’ differences in mind.” She said that participating in the CoP made her realize that the tremendous diversity at Wood Valley Middle School required special attention and teachers needed to consider a wide range of factors when working with CLD students.

Meg also recognized how teachers working to become more culturally competent could potentially benefit the entire school. She noted, “Doing this work, and getting other people involved, and having these conversations is better for everyone including the
students.” Advocating for expanding the efforts of the CoP, Meg argued, “If we . . . make these incremental steps and make improvements on how we’re doing things and how we’re aware of our students, you know, a little bit at a time and with as many people as possible”, we can make our school a better place for everyone to learn and work.

The results of the Teacher Belief Inventory and participants’ comments indicate that teachers in this study believed participating in the CoP affected their teaching practices. The survey results showed that most participants felt their knowledge and skills for working with diverse students increased. Teachers mentioned many positive effects the experience had on their own understanding of cultural identity and identified ways in which it may result in changes to their teaching practice.

My Experience in the Community of Practice

Like many of the other participants, I was nervous at the beginning of the study. My anxiety arose from an uncertainty about whether people would be willing to talk about their beliefs and experiences with cultural identity and teaching practice. I also worried that, despite being an ESOL teacher and doctoral student studying diversity and multicultural education, I might be unprepared to guide a group of teachers through critical reflection on these sensitive topics. I was anxious about discussing the influence of race and privilege on my teaching. However, my concerns dissipated after the first couple of meetings because we developed a trusting and supportive environment within the group and a synergy that resulted in positive interactions and productive reflection. I was surprised and pleased to find that participants valued and seemed to crave
opportunities to talk about racial, linguistic, and cultural differences they encountered in their personal and professional lives.

Participating in the community of practice resulted in more significant transformations to my personal perspectives than I anticipated. I quickly realized that engaging in dialogue about difference and identity with a group of diverse teachers offered benefits that my own personal reflections had rarely generated. Having the opportunity to share stories and ask questions helped me gain insights into my own identity and better understand the perspectives of others. Intentionally examining who I was and what forces shape my sense of self and my teaching practice was more productive when I could contrast my beliefs and experiences with those of others. In my second journal I wrote, “Will this community of practice experience change the way I choose to interact with people who are different from me? . . . I hope so.” In the end, I believe I realized my hopes.

Over the course of this study I became more cognizant of my White privilege and the benefits of my middle-class socioeconomic status. I resolved to examine these aspects of my identity more closely and find ways to address them in my personal interactions and professional practice. I came to understand that traditional identity categories such as race, gender, religion, age, and nationality were too simplistic and rigid to define me or anyone else; every individual has a complex, unique, and ever-changing combination of character traits, interests, and experiences that constitute their identity. I started putting more effort into getting to know my students’ cultural
backgrounds and life experiences and found joy in letting them into my life a bit more. I became more conscious of the opportunities I had as a teacher to affirm or deny students’ racial, cultural, and linguistic identities, and I took steps to address these matters in my lesson planning and instructional practices. In addition, I started speaking up when I thought teachers were being culturally or linguistically insensitive to students.

Participating in this CoP helped me develop a greater sense of empathy for people with different life experiences, and it inspired me to make changes to my personal perspectives and teaching practice.

Although managing my multiple roles in this study was difficult at times, I believe it offered a unique viewpoint. In addition to participating in the CoP, as the researcher I also had access to all the participants’ reflective journals and got to ask clarifying questions of them in interviews. These opportunities provided further insights into their experiences in the CoP and their beliefs about the influence of cultural identity on teaching practice. The breadth of this view may have increased the depth of my own reflection and enhanced the degree of my transformation.

Summary

When participants in this study engaged in a CoP to reflect critically on their cultural identities, they began a process that helped them develop new understandings of themselves and opened new possibilities in their teaching practice. This exercise in imagination gave rise to increased levels of awareness about participants’ own cultural identity and biases, made them more conscious of difference in their interactions with
students and colleagues, and increased their cognizance of the impact of diversity on their teaching practice. This heightened sense of awareness resulted in a range of personal and professional transformations for participants.

Participants in this study valued their experience in the CoP because they saw benefits in collaboratively exploring identity, culture, and diversity. The teachers developed stronger personal and professional relationships with one another and gained insight from others’ perspectives. These “eye opening” experiences created a heightened awareness of the role of diversity and difference in their work as teachers and in their lives outside of school. The experience of collaboratively and critically reflecting on identity allowed participants to learn from and with each other, develop new perspectives, and experience subtle and dramatic transformations in the process. Teachers said they believed that participating in the CoP made them more culturally conscious and attuned to the influence of diversity on their teaching practice.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of these research results. In that chapter, I state conclusions, establish connections between the literature review and the results, and describe implications for teachers, school leaders, and providers of professional learning. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research using CoPs as tools for understanding the influence of cultural identity on teaching practice.
CHAPTER 5  
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS  

This research resulted in a rich picture of what can happen when teachers engage in a community of practice (CoP) to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to the work they do with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. In this chapter, I discuss the conclusions I have made based on the findings, make connections between the results and empirical and theoretical literature, and consider the implications for teachers, school leaders, and professional learning. Finally, I describe some limitations of the study and offer recommendations for future research using CoPs for critical reflection on cultural identity in educational settings.  

Study Purpose and Research Questions  

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to reflect critically on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with CLD students.  

The main research question guiding this inquiry was:  

1. What happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities?  

To better understand how teachers engaged in critical reflection and to gain insight into their beliefs about the influence of their experience in the CoP, I asked the following supporting research questions:
2. How do teachers experience critical reflection on identity and personal bias in relation to their work with CLD students?

3. How do teachers believe participating in a CoP and reflecting on identity affects their practice with CLD students?

Summary of Findings

In this study, a process emerged when middle school teachers participated in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities. The stages of this process were:

1. Establishing initial conditions for the CoP
2. Enacting the CoP and engaging in critical reflection
3. Developing increased awareness of cultural identity and diversity
4. Exhibiting a spectrum of transformations

The process began with establishing conditions for a safe and productive collaborative group. This involved soliciting participants who had a desire to learn about cultural identity, who were willing to engage in critical reflection on their personal biases and teaching practice, and who were participating voluntarily. Another important component of starting the CoP was establishing and abiding by group-generated norms. This created a collegial and supportive environment where participants felt safe discussing intimate and controversial topics such as race, religion, and sexual orientation.

With these initial conditions established, the participants began interacting during weekly face-to-face meetings of the CoP, writing reflective journals, and exchanging text messages on a group thread. Teachers demonstrated engagement in the CoP by completing activities to explore their cultural identities, sharing their personal
experiences, developing deeper relationships with each other, and learning together. The participants exercised their power of imagination by recognizing themselves in the experiences of other, by coming to understand new perspectives, and by seeing themselves in new ways. Participants also sought alignment of their experience in the CoP with other aspects of their lives. They expressed a desire to include other school staff, they wanted to continue meeting after the study was over, and they looked for additional opportunities to continue exploring the influence of cultural identity and diversity on teaching and learning. These experiences within the CoP facilitated critical reflection for participants who began to recognize and question their assumptions, critique their behaviors and teaching practices, and develop more empathy.

As a result of their experience in the CoP, participants developed an increased awareness of issues related to identity, culture, and diversity. Participating in the group helped teachers develop better understandings of themselves as cultural beings and heightened their awareness of cultural differences among their colleagues and students. This experience also made teachers more aware of the influence cultural identity had on their teaching practices.

As a result of this increased awareness, participants in the study exhibited a spectrum of transformations that ranged from subtle to dramatic. All teachers demonstrated new understandings about cultural identity. Many participants began to see new and expanded possibilities for themselves as culturally responsive educators. Several teachers took specific actions to learn more about diversity, and others planned for or made changes to their teaching practice.
The power and potential of this particular CoP came from its members: Dominique, Heidi, Jasmine, Jayne, Leigh, Lucy, Meg, Nancy, Serah, and me. Each member brought her own unique experiences and perspectives and contributed to the group in distinct and valuable ways. We shared many common experiences related to working at Wood Valley Middle School; however, each participant’s lived experience inside and outside that setting shaped her contributions and her feelings about the relationship of cultural identity to teaching practice. Participants’ age, race, linguistic background, and years of teaching experience did not appear to be factors that influenced their experience of critical reflection on identity within the CoP or their beliefs about how the experience affected their practice. Teachers with 20 or more years of experience exhibited both subtle and dramatic transformations, and those with fewer years in the classroom fell across the spectrum of change. Similarly, teachers of various ages, races, and linguistic and backgrounds expressed beliefs that their participation in the CoP would have a range of effects on their practice. Despite their many differences, all participants commented that the experience was meaningful and beneficial for them personally and professionally.

Within the context of social learning theory, learning as a collaborative process has implications for individuals, communities, and organizations (Wenger, 1998). Individuals learn by engaging in communities of practice, learning communities grow through the contributions of their members over time, and organizational learning happens via the sustained practice of the interconnected learning communities within the organization. The individuals within the CoP at the heart of this study contributed to
group learning, while simultaneously deriving new understandings for themselves about culture, identity, and teaching. The learning that transpired within the CoP did not remain there; it expanded into the school as a larger organization when members of the CoP utilized new learning in their classrooms and when they shared ideas about diversity with other faculty and staff.

Wenger (1998) noted “the inseparable duality of the social and the individual” (p. 14) as an underlying theme of social learning theory, and that principle was evident in this study. Participants generated meaning and power for themselves as individuals and collectively as a group. Teachers’ experience of critical reflection on cultural identity and teaching practice in a CoP at Wood Valley was a unique event; however, that does not mean that it is not replicable with other groups of individuals in other contexts. Every CoP has the potential to generate meaning from the contributions of its members within the distinct environment in which it exists. Therefore, I believe it would be possible and productive for teachers in other settings to create their own CoPs to engage in critical reflection on the intersection of cultural identity and teaching practice. Doing so may improve educational outcomes for CLD students as well as create more inclusive and supportive school communities.

Conclusions

Based on the data gathered in this case study, I can draw several conclusions about what happens when middle school teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities. The first conclusion is participating in a CoP can help teachers better understand how their own identities, assumptions, and beliefs influence their teaching
practice. The second conclusion is learning in a collaborative social environment allows teachers to develop stronger personal and professional relationships and gain insight from others’ perspectives on diversity and teaching practice. The third conclusion is critical reflection on cultural identity leads to increased awareness of diversity that can foster personal and professional transformations. The final conclusion is critical reflection on cultural identity and its relationship to teaching can be a beneficial experience that results in developing identities as more culturally responsive teachers.

Understanding Cultural Identity’s Influence on Teaching Practice

Even though many scholars have lauded the benefits of teachers engaging in critical reflection on cultural identity and the ways in which cultural differences and personal biases affect practice (Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Nieto, 2013), I have seen little evidence of this happening on a regular basis in K-12 public schools. A review of the literature showed a dearth of research on how in-service teachers can use CoPs to reflect critically on cultural identity and its impact on their teaching practices. This study adds to the existing body of educational research on this topic by showing that middle school teachers found it beneficial to engage in a CoP to examine the influence of their own cultural identities and biases on their work with diverse students.

This study showed that teachers can develop more sophisticated understandings of cultural identity and aspects of diversity through critical reflection on their own identity within a CoP. By intentionally and thoughtfully examining aspects of their own cultural identity, participants in this study gained new appreciation for the cultural identities of
their colleagues and students. As the teachers learned more about their similarities and differences within the CoP, they began to recognize the need to further explore the role of culture and identity in their pedagogical practice.

Like educators in earlier studies, the teachers in this study also showed that they have the capacity to identify, interrogate, and possibly change their assumptions and biases when given resources, time, and space to do so (Allard & Santoro, 2006; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Shockley & Banks, 2011). Participants recognized that developing cultural competence is an ongoing process facilitated by engaging in dialogue with people who have different life experiences. Teachers were able to identify specific effects of cultural identity on their teaching practices and their approaches to building relationships with students and their families. They realized that being mindful of the influences of cultural identity in education is a challenging task that requires constant effort and attention. Participants also became more cognizant of the agency they have to make their practices more culturally responsive.

Findings in this research support previous empirical studies that showed teachers’ identities and pedagogical practices are closely connected (Allard & Santoro, 2006; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Milner, 2011; Santoro, 2009). By engaging in dialogue with women from different races, countries, linguistic backgrounds, and sexual orientations, the teachers in this study came to realize the extent to which these aspects of identity influence their perspectives about teaching and learning in a diverse society. With the diversity of student populations in U.S. schools increasing (de Brey et al., 2019), it is essential for teachers to recognize the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic
divides that may separate them from their students (Cummins, 2000; Howard, 2016; White et al., 2005). The teachers in this study were able to use critical reflection as a tool to develop deeper understandings of themselves as cultural beings and gain appreciation of the cultural and linguistic resources students bring to their classrooms (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Seidl & Conley, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2013). Participants became more conscious of the influence of diversity on their interactions with students, parents, and colleagues and recognized the power they have to reach across cultural gaps and “demographic divide[s]” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 1) to improve educational experiences for CLD students. This study showed that critical reflection can help teachers more fully appreciate the influence of their own cultural identities, biases, and assumptions on pedagogical practice.

Learning in a Community of Practice

The CoP created for this research was a fully functioning learning community. Despite its intentional creation for the purpose of conducting this study and existing for only eight weeks, the CoP provided participants with multiple opportunities to engage with one another to explore cultural identity in relation to teaching CLD students. Through regular interactions with one another, teachers were able to negotiate new meanings for themselves as individuals and collectively as a group. They could imagine themselves in new ways and take steps to align their new understandings in contexts beyond the CoP, including their classrooms and their lives outside of school. The teachers in this study developed identities of participation within the CoP, and they were also able to incorporate their experience into an evolving sense of themselves. In other
words, this was a legitimate CoP that resulted in powerful, lasting, and transformative learning for its members.

As in earlier research, teachers in this study appreciated working in a supportive professional learning community that provided space for them to acknowledge themselves as cultural beings (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Santoro, 2009; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Seidl & Conley, 2009) and provided opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016). The participants in this study, like those in previous research, found the CoP to be an effective structure for engaging in critical reflection and working collaboratively to improve practice (Aldana & Martinez, 2018; Borg, 2012; Brody & Hadar, 2011; DeMeulenaere, 2015; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Hodges & Cady, 2013; Patton & Parker, 2017). Additionally, the results support the notion that creating an effective CoP is a process that begins with establishing a common purpose and a safe space for participants to build relationships and collaboratively grapple with challenging issues to improve teaching practice (Patton & Parker, 2017).

In this study, participants engaged in collaborative activities, shared stories, recognized their own experiences in the lives of others, created new meaning through practice, saw themselves in new ways, and opened to new perspectives. These exercises in engagement and imagination resulted in critical reflection in which participants critiqued themselves and their practice, questioned hegemonic assumptions, and developed empathy. Hearing the experiences and perspectives of others within a safe and
supportive environment allowed teachers to examine themselves and adjust their frames of reference to be more inclusive (Mezirow, 1997).

Not only did participants in the CoP learn from one another, but they also developed stronger personal and professional relationships. Building these interpersonal relationships helped teachers feel safe when sharing their experiences and discussing sensitive issues like race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Establishing and abiding by group norms helped create a supportive and trusting environment for exploring identity. A sense of camaraderie developed amongst the members, participants valued these new relationships, and they continued building these connections outside the context of the CoP. These results demonstrate that collaborative social learning can provide opportunities for teachers to develop more inclusive perspectives on diversity and build meaningful relationships with colleagues.

Increasing Awareness of Diversity Can Foster Transformation

The teachers in this study frequently mentioned “eye-opening” experiences that encouraged them to reflect critically on cultural identity and come to new understandings. Through the process of negotiating new meanings, participants developed new perspectives and increased levels of awareness about cultural diversity. This led to transformation in teachers’ practices and in their understandings of themselves.

Several participants in this study sought opportunities to expand their learning and engage in CoPs beyond the study to continue developing their cultural competence. One participant attended a conference, others read books about racial identity, and some joined a book club to learn more about equity in education. Engagement in the CoP
allowed participants to imagine new ways of being a teacher and encouraged them to seek membership in other communities to further align their new perspectives and assist in the continuing negotiation of their identities as culturally responsive teachers.

The transformations teachers in this study exhibited suggest that participating in a CoP to reflect critically on cultural identity and its relationship to teaching practice can be a transformative learning experience. Mezirow (1997, 1998, 2009) saw critical self-reflection on assumptions and participating in discourse with others about differing points of view as two key elements of the transformative learning process. Participants in this study engaged in both of these activities and experienced learning that was transformative.

The teachers in this study engaged in collaborative exercises and reflective journaling as ways of exploring their cultural identities and examining their assumptions about diversity. While examining their own identities, participants had opportunities to critique some of the “cultural, social, linguistic, educational, economic, political, psychological, [and] religious” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92) factors that give shape to people’s habits of mind. Illuminating these normally hidden foundations of their assumptions gave participants greater access to new points of view, made them more receptive to feedback from others, and increased their awareness of the influences of cultural identity. During formal meetings of the CoP and informal encounters in the school setting and elsewhere, participants also experienced opportunities for discourse. One of the key features that distinguishes discourse from regular conversation is that discourse involves considering a range of possibilities and perspectives when attempting to understand
something or justify a belief (Mezirow, 1997, 1998). Discussions within the CoP reached this level of discourse, thus exposing participants to new perspectives that made them examine their own beliefs in new ways.

Mezirow (1997) claimed that the goal of adult education is to enable autonomous thinking. He suggested that helping adult learners become more critical of their own beliefs and the ideas of others can lead to transformative learning experiences. Critical self-reflection requires examining one’s assumptions from both an individual perspective and a social contextual perspective (Mezirow, 1998). Similar to the way that Vygotsky (1934/1986) linked social language and cognitive development in children, Mezirow (1997, 2009) saw dialectical discourse as a mechanism for helping adults develop new understandings by sharing, analyzing, and challenging their own ideas and the ideas of others. While participating in the CoP, participants in this study became more critical of their assumptions and developed new understandings that led to transformations like those described in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory.

Empathy, desire to change, and transformation. What makes a person more receptive to the effects of transformative learning? Scholars have wondered if it is related to personal characteristics, timing, or the features of particular transformative experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). All the participants in this study showed signs of transformation; however, those who showed more empathy and expressed a greater desire to change made more dramatic transformations than the other participants. Figure 7 in Chapter 4 shows the influence of these two factors on the types of transformations participants made.
Taylor and Cranton (2013) called for more research on how empathy contributes to transformative learning and what inspires a desire to change. Regarding empathy, these scholars claimed,

It is in the context of dialogue, critical reflection, and experience that the role of empathy comes to life. It is empathy that provides the motivation (altruistic interest) to “listen” to others; the means to better understand the perspective of another, an awareness of their feelings and understanding of their mental state, and the ability to accurately demonstrate that understanding. (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 38)

The CoP in this study provided these conditions for empathy to come to life. All participants had the chance to imagine and understand the thoughts and experiences of others as they shared stories and engaged in dialogue and critical reflection on cultural identity and teaching practice. However, Jasmine and Lucy, the two participants who experienced the most dramatic transformations, showed greater expressions of empathy than did the other participants.

Additionally, participants who frequently expressed a desire to make changes to their personal perspectives or teaching practices demonstrated more dramatic transformations. Jasmine, Lucy, and Meg often mentioned revising lessons, changing how they interacted with students, and wanting to become more culturally responsive. Taylor and Cranton (2013) called for more research to determine what brings people to the brink of transformation—a culmination of past experiences, specific personality traits, current mental state, or certain characteristics of an environment. All 10 participants in
this project said wanting to learn and grow was one of the reasons they joined the study, so what made some of them experience more dramatic transformations than others? Perhaps Jasmine and Lucy’s prior life experiences, personality traits, or events occurring in their lives during the study made them more empathetic and receptive to making changes to the ways they thought about cultural identity and its relationship to teaching. Perhaps Meg was more ready for change because of personal circumstance, character traits, or because she was a novice teacher. Ultimately, the results of this study suggest a connection between empathy, desire to change, and transformation. The findings also support Taylor and Cranton’s (2013) recommendation for further examination of how these factors influence transformative learning experiences.

Subtle and dramatic changes. Participants experienced a range of transformations from subtle shifts in perspective to noteworthy modifications of behavior. Teachers became more attuned to cultural differences, they envisioned themselves as more culturally responsive teachers, they sought opportunities to learn more about diversity, and they made changes to their lessons, philosophical approaches, and perspectives on building relationships with students. Subtle changes included several teachers who spoke of putting more effort into getting to know their students’ cultural backgrounds, interests, and linguistic repertoires. Others mentioned being more intentional in making their course content more culturally relevant and providing students with more opportunities to take pride in their cultural heritages.

Some participants made more dramatic transformations. For example, Jasmine realized that her colorblind approach to teaching was a disservice to students because it
showed a disregard for their identities. Lucy made significant changes to her teaching practice that included planning more inclusive lessons for her Spanish language classes, vowing to build stronger relationships with students by allowing for more sharing of life experiences, and being more mindful of her own biases. Meg’s experience in the group prompted her to attend a conference on social justice in education, and she helped establish an equity book club for the staff of Wood Valley Middle School.

The three participants who made the most dramatic changes stated that the CoP provided a forum for intentionally examining their own perspectives on culture and diversity and for contrasting their beliefs with the viewpoints of other members. Participants attributed their transformations to the increased awareness of diversity they developed in the CoP. Data from this case study show that critical reflection on cultural identity can increase teachers’ awareness of diversity and stimulate personal and professional transformation.

It is possible that teachers with more rigidly defined teacher identities may experience more dramatic transformations as a result of critical reflection on cultural identity within a CoP. While most participants in the study described their teaching practice as evolving and dynamic, the two participants who demonstrated the most noticeable pedagogical changes had more firm and inflexible views of their identities as teachers. Over their long careers, Jasmine and Lucy had come to understand themselves as specific kinds of teachers. When they encountered new ideas, engaged in dialogue with others holding different perspectives, and critically examined their biases, they seemed unable to reconcile new learning with previously held beliefs about themselves as
teachers. Perhaps the disorientation they experienced in the CoP created an opportunity to develop not only new understandings about diversity but also about their identities as teachers. Significant shifts in perspectives may be more likely when teachers hold stronger and more clearly defined views of their identities.

Developing Identities as Culturally Responsive Teachers

The results of this study also validate prior research suggesting critical reflection on cultural identity can shape teachers’ beliefs about CLD students and give rise to more culturally responsive perspectives (Acquah & Commins, 2015, 2017; Acquah et al., 2016; Allard & Santoro, 2006, 2008; De Costa & Norton, 2017; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Santoro, 2009; Summer, 2014). Teachers in this study frequently mentioned that participating in the CoP heightened their awareness of cultural diversity and made them more cognizant of the influence of individual differences on the teaching and learning process. When provided the opportunity to learn about cultural differences and reflect on their teaching practice, participants in this study began to change some of their deficit thinking and develop asset-based perspectives of CLD students. These results mirror those of earlier studies (Allard & Santoro, 2008; D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Johnson & Freeman, 2010; Mellom et al., 2018; Molle, 2013; Shields, 2010; Shockley & Banks, 2011) and suggest that critical reflection on cultural identity within a CoP can help teachers develop identities as culturally responsive practitioners.

Wenger (1998) posited that the transformational experience of learning within a CoP is an act of identity. He saw “identity and practice as mirror images of each other”
Wenger (1998, p. 149). Wenger described several parallels existing between practice and identity. For example, Wenger (1998) wrote that “negotiating meaning in practice” (p. 150) aligns with the “negotiated experience of self” (p. 150) that becomes identity; participating in a CoP allows for identification as a member of that group; and when a CoP develops a “shared history of learning” (p. 150), that can enable individuals to develop learning trajectories that inform their identity. In other words, participation in a CoP is not only a matter of learning; it is a matter of becoming someone new—someone who knows more and can do new things. As participants in this study engaged in the CoP, exercised their imaginations, and aligned their experience with the bigger picture of who they are in the world, they were also forming new identities. Social learning is a transformative process because it is empowering and alters our understanding of who we are (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, the participants in this study underwent an experience of identity because they improved their knowledge of cultural identity as it relates to teaching and developed new understandings of themselves as cultural beings.

It is also possible to view the changes participants experienced through the lens of Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory. Some scholars have criticized transformation theory for focusing too much on cognition and dismissing the contextual nature of learning, as well as the social and emotional factors that influence learning (Illeris, 2014). Kegan (2009) interrogated Mezirow’s theory by asking what exactly gets transformed during transformative learning. Noting that there had been no satisfactory answer to Kegan’s question, Illeris (2014) attempted to find a term to describe the target area that undergoes transformation in this type of learning. Illeris concluded that the
word *identity* could be used to provide a better understanding of what is actually changed by the process of transformative learning.

Illeris (2014) explained that the modern concept of identity is frequently attributed to Erik Erikson, “who defined it as a combination of the personal experience of being the same in all the different situations of life and how we wish to present ourselves to others” (p. 154). Identity from this perspective encompasses both internal aspects of the individual psychological self as well as the external socially constructed self. Therefore, saying that identity is reshaped during transformative learning accounts for the situated nature of learning in social contexts as well as the individual emotional interpretations of learning experiences (Illeris, 2014).

Illeris (2014) proposed that transformational learning acts mainly upon or within the personality layer of identity to affect change to what Mezirow (1997) called frames of reference, habits of mind, or meaning perspectives (2009). In other words, one’s habits of mind and frames of reference are components of a person’s personality layer of identity. These perspectives shape how a person sees him- or herself, other people, experiences, society, and the world. When people engage in experiences that change these ingrained meaning perspectives, they are actually transforming some aspect of who they are as a person; that is to say, they are changing an aspect of their identity (Illeris, 2014).

When participants in this study engaged with the CoP to reflect critically on their identities, they were beginning a process that led to imagining new ways of understanding themselves and opened new possibilities in their teaching practice. Adult
learners need imagination to be able to “redefine problems from a new perspective” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10) and envision new possibilities for understanding the world around them. Imagination in this sense is a creative process closely connected to how people experience the world and envision themselves in it (Wenger, 1998). In social learning theory, “the creative character of imagination is anchored in social interactions and communal experiences” (Wenger, 1998, p. 178). Imagination is not mere individual escapist fantasy; Wenger (1998) wrote, “It is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity” (p. 178). It is possible to view imagination as a link between learning from experience and envisioning new understandings of the self. New understandings of the self may result in changes in people’s frames of reference which is a hallmark of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2009). Hence, imagination plays an integral role in transformative learning and in conceptualizing identity.

This exercise in imagination gave rise to increased levels of awareness about participants’ own cultural identities and biases and made them more conscious of difference in their interactions with students and colleagues, as well as more cognizant of the impact of diversity on their teaching practices. This heightened sense of awareness resulted in personal and professional transformations for participants. Wenger (1998) argued that this type of learning “is an experience of identity” (p. 215) because it changes what people know, what they can do, and in essence alters who they are. After participating in the CoP and critically reflecting on cultural identity, participants began to see themselves as more culturally responsive educators. Therefore, the transformations
experienced by teachers in this study could be interpreted as changes to identity. To put it succinctly, critical reflection on the relationship of cultural identity and practice can encourage teachers to develop identities as more culturally responsive educators.

In conclusion, the results of this study showed notable alignment with existing empirical and theoretical literature. These findings provide further evidence that teachers’ identities influence their practice, and the data also suggest that providing teachers with safe supportive environments for exploring diversity, interrogating assumptions, and engaging in dialogue can lead them to become more culturally responsive. Additionally, this case study corroborates earlier research indicating that CoPs are sites of meaningful collaborative learning and productive mechanisms for improving teaching practice. In relation to theory, the results of this research also substantiate Wenger’s (1998) claims that combinations of the modes of belonging to a CoP can result in critical reflection, new understandings, expanded possibilities, and taking action to change practice. The lens of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, 1998) helps explain the spectrum of transformations participants exhibited after increasing their awareness of cultural identity and diversity. Finally, I contend that these transformations may be interpreted as changes to participants’ identities.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge about teacher reflection on cultural identity and teaching practice in diverse settings. It filled a gap in the literature about how in-service middle school teachers can use CoPs as a venue to collaboratively explore cultural differences, increase awareness of diversity, and engage in critical
examination of their teaching practices. These findings have implications for teachers, school leaders, and developers of professional learning initiatives.

Implications

The participants in this study developed a deeper awareness of issues related to diversity and transformed some of their perspectives about cultural identity. In addition, the data indicate that teachers had positive experiences engaging in critical reflection within a CoP, they preferred reflective discussions over writing, and they were able to identify hindrances to reflection and challenges associated with heightened awareness of cultural difference in their teaching practice. At the end of the study, participants indicated an increase in knowledge and skills for working with CLD students and expressed beliefs that their experience in the CoP would result in them taking steps to make their practice more culturally responsive. These results suggest this research may have implications for teachers, school leaders, and professional learning leaders.

Implications for Teachers

This case study indicates that CoPs can provide teachers with an effective venue for collaborative exploration of cultural identity and its relationship to teaching practice. When teachers have the opportunity to examine their own identities, biases, and experiences and engage in dialogue with others, they can become more reflective and culturally responsive practitioners. The CoP inspired critical reflection that led to increased awareness of self, colleagues, students, and teaching practice and resulted in transformations to teachers’ perspectives and behaviors. This suggests that teachers who want to become more culturally responsive might join with others who have a similar
desire and work together to examine the role of culture, identity, and diversity in their practice. Wenger (1998) argued that education involves “exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state” (p. 263). Teachers can use CoPs to better understand their own cultural identities, their identities as teachers within particular institutional contexts, and to negotiate new understandings of themselves, their students, and their work as educators.

This research shows that teachers can transform their perspectives on diversity and their pedagogies by engaging in a CoP. Developing an identity of participation within a CoP helps teachers better understand who they are in relation to others and empowers them to change and align their teaching practice with new understandings about cultural competence. As CoPs often evolve organically among people with a common purpose, there is no need to wait on school leaders to initiate this type of work. Teachers can create their own CoPs and begin reflecting critically on culture, identity, and practice as they relate to their specific contexts. Teachers can take the initiative and begin the process whenever they are ready.

The CoP in this study consisted of teachers from sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and various content areas at one diverse school. Familiarity with one another, a shared school culture, and knowing each other’s students provided the participants with a common ground upon which they could begin their work together. However, it is reasonable to think that similar CoPs could be established in different settings and comprised of different members. For example, a group of teachers working at different locations might achieve similar results in an online or physical setting given appropriate
time to develop personal connections and establish a safe and supportive environment to reflect critically on their cultural identities and teaching practices. Teachers might also work to create CoPs that include additional school staff such as counselors and administrators. By joining forces with others in the school community, teachers might be able to expand the reach of improved cultural competence within a school.

Implications for Professional Learning and School Leaders

The present study also highlights several implications for professional learning and school leaders. Scholars have noted that professional learning that is more collaborative in structure, inquiry-based, reflective in nature, and sustained over longer periods of time is more effective than shorter trainings or one-day workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2008). By their very nature, CoPs can provide an ideal setting for professional learning that is more contextualized, long-term, and supportive of teacher growth (Wesley & Buysse, 2001). Consequently, developers of professional learning for teachers and school leaders should consider utilizing CoPs when looking for effective professional development models.

CoPs are beneficial sites of learning, but they are likely unsuccessful if mandated by leadership (Wenger, 1998). Leaders should help ensure that structures are in place that facilitate collaboration within safe and supportive teacher-led communities. Familiarizing faculty and staff with the benefits of CoPs and encouraging them to form communities around areas of interest are ways to reorient the locus of power in schools. Leadership of a CoP comes from within, and it is a dynamic, nonhierarchical force (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015); therefore, it is essential that
school leaders and those conducting ongoing professional learning relinquish control and promote ownership of the learning process among group members. Additionally, participation in CoPs should also be voluntary. Brookfield (2017) maintained that mandatory participation in critical reflection can be counterproductive, so if leaders want teachers to engage in meaningful ways, they should make participation CoPs optional and inviting.

Specifically, the current study supports the use of CoPs as a mechanism for increasing teacher awareness of the influences of cultural diversity on their pedagogical practice. Researchers have shown that teacher identity and pedagogical practice are intertwined (D’warte, 2014; Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Nieto, 2013; Santoro, 2009). Furthermore, multiple forces such as racism, deficit thinking, gender bias, and heteronormativity shape the complex process of teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse environments (Gay & Howard, 2000; Olsen, 2012). Teachers first need to understand themselves as cultural beings (Acquah & Commins, 2017; Seidl & Conley, 2009) with beliefs and biases that influence their teaching practice before taking steps to make their teaching more culturally responsive (Gay, 2010). The data from this study suggest that teachers can accomplish this work within a CoP. Therefore, leaders interested in promoting culturally responsive practices may want to explore using CoPs as a way for school faculty and staff to collaboratively explore the intersections of cultural identity and diversity with teaching and learning. These types of professional learning opportunities may better prepare teachers for the challenges of working in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.
In summary, the results of this study indicate that CoPs can provide teachers with much needed opportunities to explore their own identity, collaboratively engage in critical reflection, increase their awareness of cultural diversity, as well as plan for and enact culturally responsive teaching practices. This has implications for teachers as individuals, the designers of professional learning for educators, and school leaders who want to make teaching and learning environments more welcoming and supportive of diverse students and teachers. The next section addresses some limitations of this study.

Limitations

I acknowledge that this study has several limitations. Some of these are quite apparent and there may be others I have not yet recognized. As participants mentioned, the short timeframe of the study limited the opportunities we had to establish routines and build a repertoire of resources for exploring identity and reflecting on teaching practice. Additionally, making meaningful and lasting transformations to personal perspectives and pedagogical practices may require more time than this study allowed (Mezirow, 1997). My previous relationships with participants may also have influenced teachers’ experience in the CoP. Rather than see our familiarity with one another as a detriment to the study, I believe it helped establish an environment of respect and trust more quickly than an outside researcher may have been able to accomplish.

Another limitation was the small sample size. This study examined only 10 teachers at one school, and all the teachers were female. Toward the end of the study, several participants suggested the inclusion of male perspectives might have enriched our group discussions. Although the single setting and low number of participants may
suggest some lack of transferability to other contexts, I believe these factors were fundamental to the success of the CoP. In fact, because of the limited number of participants, members were able to engage in more meaningful discussions than would have been possible in a larger group. Over the course of the study teachers built relationships with one another that enabled them to share intimate aspects of their personal life and teaching practice. While small sample size may be a common limitation for qualitative studies, in this case it allowed for deeper connections among participants and resulted in a rich depiction of what can happen when teachers collaboratively examine their own cultural identities in relation to their work with CLD students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The benefits of teachers engaging in a CoP were abundantly clear in this research. I believe this study suggests many possibilities for future research on using CoPs to facilitate the exploration of cultural identity and pedagogical practice.

First, I would recommend conducting of similar studies in different settings and school environments. Wood Valley Middle School, where this study occurred, was a racially, culturally, and economically diverse public school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. It would be interesting to see if replication of this study in private schools, in other countries or areas of the United States, or in settings that were more homogeneous, rural, or urban, would yield the same results.

Second, future research could include a different population of participants. The participants in this study were culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse; however,
they were all female and from Christian backgrounds. Conducting studies in mixed
gender groups, with people of different religious affiliations, or in groups of more
homogeneous participants might produce different insights about the usefulness of CoPs
to explore the intersection of cultural identity, critical reflection, and teaching practice.

Third, conducting a similar study over a longer period of time would allow the
CoP to develop more of a history of shared practice and provide greater understanding of
the lasting effects of the experience. Many participants in this study mentioned the short
timeframe as a factor that constrained their participation and transformation. Further,
because participants in this study were asked if they believed participating in the study
may cause them to make changes to their teaching practice, a follow-up study could
confirm whether the teachers actually implemented any of the changes they mentioned.

Teachers and their pedagogical practices are only one facet of the complex
integrated systems of which schools are comprised. Inviting other staff members such as
administrators, counselors, media specialists, paraprofessionals, and district leaders to
participate in a CoP to examine identity, bias, culture, and diversity may provide
additional insights into the influence of cultural identity on the overall workings of a
particular school or system. Research with these different groups of educators may
reveal additional layers of influence that cultural identity has on the school experience for
students and adults.

Another suggestion is to conduct research in which educators focus on specific
aspects of identity, such as race, religion, language, socioeconomic status, and LGBTQ
(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer) issues. For example, in this
study, teachers frequently mentioned feeling unprepared to support students who were in the process of negotiating their gender identities or transitioning from one gender to another. However, we had few resources and little time to fully address the issue. If members of a CoP chose to concentrate their efforts on a given topic, they might be able to come to a fuller understanding of its implications and better prepare themselves to meet the needs of specific groups of students or colleagues. Within particular contexts different CoPs might arise to address the needs of specific matters of importance to the community, and researchers could learn more about how educators identify areas of interest and how they work collaboratively to generate understandings about different aspects of identity.

Finally, additional research is needed to examine the factors that influence the transformations teachers experience as a result of critically reflecting on cultural identity within a CoP. In this study, the extent to which teachers expressed empathy and showed a desire to change affected the degree of transformation they demonstrated. However, more study is needed to determine if people with firmly defined teacher identities are susceptible to more dramatic transformations in these situations than those with more flexible and evolving teacher identities.

In conclusion, this study about what happens when teachers engage in a CoP to examine their own cultural identities raised many questions about how to use CoPs in educational settings to explore the intersection of teacher identity and practice. Results showed that CoPs can be a useful tool for collaborative inquiry and critical reflection on issues of diversity in education. More research is necessary to better understand the
potential of using CoPs to help teachers improve their practice and make schools more welcoming and inclusive for diverse students and teachers.

Final Thoughts: Stepping Into Awareness

When I asked Nancy if she believed participating in this CoP might influence her teaching practice, she shared this anecdote:

We can step so far away from awareness. You know like you can go hiking in the woods and be out there all day long. And then all of a sudden you look down and there’s a snake. And you’re like, “S---!” And you take one step away, and you’re completely safe. I mean you’re completely safe. He’s there and he’s running off, and you’re over here. But for this brief moment it’s like, “H---, I could’ve died.” But all day you’ve been in the woods not thinking about snakes at all. And then all of a sudden and for the rest of your hike, what are you doing? You’re watching for snakes. You’re very cautious and careful and stuff. And it’s like we need that awareness. You need somebody to say, “Let’s think about this a little bit deeper.”

Nancy saw her participation in the CoP as an experience that helped her think more deeply about culture, identity, and diversity in her life and teaching practice. She valued the time she spent with members of the group and recognized how important it is to develop greater awareness of cultural differences. I see Nancy’s comments and the results of this study as evidence that teachers need more opportunities to step into a greater sense of awareness about cultural identity and its relationship to the work they do as educators.
Nancy’s anecdote about encountering a snake in the woods is an apt metaphor for teacher awareness of the impact of cultural diversity on education. The forest is full of wild creatures, but people are often too busy to go hiking or notice the wildlife when they do because they focus narrowly on the path in front of them. Similarly, cultural diversity is an ever-present feature of most 21st-century classrooms, but it often goes unnoticed, or it is intentionally ignored. The countless demands on a teacher’s time may cause her to focus too narrowly on the prescribed path—following state standards, improving test scores, complying with district demands. Under such stress, she may lose sight of what drew her to teaching in the first place—a love of learning, building meaningful relationships, and caring for and supporting students. Perhaps education would benefit from a few snakes being thrown on the path to remind teachers to pay closer attention to the cultural differences that surround them every day and the impact those have on teaching and learning in a diverse society.

For Nancy and other participants in the study, reflecting on their own cultural identity within a CoP provided space and time to think more deeply about issues of race, language, culture, religion, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation in their classrooms and in their lives outside of school. By examining their own beliefs and assumptions they developed increased awareness of not only themselves but also of their colleagues, their students, and their teaching practices. This increased awareness led to transformations in participants’ perspectives and pedagogies and led them further down the path on their journeys toward more culturally responsive teaching.
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APPENDIX A

SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL AND CORRESPONDING QUESTIONS

(LSA INCLUSIVE TEACHING, 2017A, B)
Step 1: Fill in the sections of the wheel with labels for each category that you feel best fit you.

Step 2: Review the prompts in the middle of the circle. Use the numbers (1-5) to identify categories that best fit the description. For example, if you most often think about your gender and age identities, you would put a 1 beside those.
Step 3: Discuss your social identity wheel with the group. You may use some of the following questions to facilitate the discussion.

1. What part of your identity do you think people first notice about you?
2. What part of your identity are you most comfortable sharing with other people?
3. What part of your identity are you least comfortable sharing with other people?
4. What part of your identity are you most proud of?
5. What part of your identity did you struggle the most with growing up?
6. What part of your identity is the most important to you?
7. What part of your identity is least important to you?
8. What part of other people’s identities do you notice first?
9. For what part of your identity do you feel you face oppression for most often?
10. For what part of your identity do you feel you receive privilege for most often?
11. Which identities have the strongest effect on how you see yourself as a person?
12. What part of your identity do you see having the most effect on your interactions with students?
13. What part of students’ identities do you most often see effecting their interactions with you?
14. What part of your identity do you see having the most effect on your interactions with coworkers/peers?

Citations
APPENDIX B

MULTICULTURAL TEACHING COMPETENCY SCALE (MTCS)

(SPANIEMAN ET AL., 2001)
TEACHER BELIEFS INVENTORY SCORING PROCEDURE


1=Strongly Disagree
2=Moderately Disagree
3=slightly disagree
4=slightly agree
5=Moderately Agree
6=Strongly Agree

1. ____ I plan many activities to celebrate diverse cultural practices in my classroom.

2. ____ I understand the various communication styles among different racial and ethnic minority students in my classroom.

3. ____ I consult regularly with other teachers or administrators to help me understand multicultural issues related to instruction.

4. ____ I have a clear understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.

5. ____ I often include examples of the experiences and perspectives of racial and ethnic groups during my classroom lessons.

6. ____ I plan school events to increase students' knowledge about cultural experiences of various racial and ethnic groups.

7. ____ I am knowledgeable about racial and ethnic identity theories.

8. ____ My curricula integrate topics and events from racial and ethnic minority populations.

9. ____ I am knowledgeable of how historical experiences of various racial and ethnic minority groups may affect students' learning.

10. ____ I make changes within the general school environment so racial and ethnic minority students will have an equal opportunity for success.

11. ____ I am knowledgeable about the particular teaching strategies that affirm the racial and ethnic identities of all students.

12. ____ I rarely examine the instructional materials I use in the classroom for racial and ethnic bias.

13. ____ I integrate the cultural values and lifestyles of racial and ethnic minority groups into my teaching.

14. ____ I am knowledgeable about the various community resources within the city that I teach.

15. ____ I often promote diversity by the behaviors I exhibit.

16. ____ I establish strong, supportive relationships with racial and ethnic minority parents.

Item #12, which is bolded above, is reverse scored such that 6 = 1, 5 = 2, 4 = 3, 3 = 4, 2 = 5, 1 = 6. Higher scores indicate greater levels of multicultural teaching competency.

Factor 1: Multicultural Teaching Skill consists of the following 10 items: 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16

Factor 2: Multicultural Teaching Knowledge consists of the following 6 items: 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, and 14

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APPENDIX C

DIVERSITY PROFILE

(STOCKTON UNIVERSITY, 2011)
Exercise #2: Diversity Profile

Directions: Put a check (✓) in all the appropriate boxes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In my environment,</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black/African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaska Native</th>
<th>Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Two or More Races</th>
<th>LGBTQ</th>
<th>Disabled</th>
<th>Veteran</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1 I am</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 My co-workers are</td>
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<td>3 My supervisor is</td>
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<td>4 My elementary school was predominately</td>
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<td>5 My teachers were mostly</td>
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<td>6 Most of my close friends are</td>
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<td>7 My dentist is</td>
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<td>8 My doctor is</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Other people who live in my home</td>
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<td>10 People who regularly visit my home</td>
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<td>1 My neighbors are</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discussion points:

- This matrix can tell you a lot about your surroundings.
- Often, people find that their intercultural experiences are clustered; in the residence halls for instance. They often also are passive (one-way) and not interactive.
- Having this information on paper allows us to use them in new ways. Few other events force us to take stock of our multicultural interchanges.
- Most people don’t bring this information into their consciousness. They subconsciously are convinced that they are fairly multicultural. It can be jarring to discover how homogenous our environment is and our environment has had and continues to have an effect on our beliefs.
- This matrix can give us ideas about how we might enrich our cultural environment and how to reach out to and get to know people who belong to different groups (joining a club or community group that includes different kinds of people is an example).

Fair use.
APPENDIX D

THINKING ABOUT OUR OWN IDENTITIES

(TEACHING TOLERANCE, N.D.B)
Thinking About Our Own Identities

**STEP 1 Directions:** For each statement, offer one to three different endings.
For example, if the statement begins with “I am,” you could complete the sentence by saying a teacher, happy, a runner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>My Answers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe…</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 2 Directions:**
In the third column of the chart, identify if each statement is **Visible**, **Invisible**, or **Both**.

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Identity Categories

How many of the characteristics you included in your list fit **neatly** into one of the following categories:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Race
- Religion
- Socioeconomic Status
- Language
- Sexual Orientation
- Education
- Career
- Relationship Status?

**Which could fit into more than one category?**

Reflect

Take a moment to look back at the statements about yourself.

1. Were you surprised by any of your answers?

2. How do these statements help you to better understand who you are as a person?

3. What are the visible characteristics of your identity? What are the invisible characteristics?

4. How has your identity changed over time?

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https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/social-justice-standards/unpacking-identity
APPENDIX E

GUIDED REFLECTION PROTOCOL

(HOLE & MCENTEE, 1999)
Directions: Follow the steps below to write about an experience you have had that connects to our discussions about identity, diversity, culture, etc.

1. Choose an incident. Think about how you have experienced diversity or aspects of cultural identity during this past week. You may use one of the incidents you reported by text or any other experience you feel is relevant to our work as a community of practice or to your teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

2. What happened? Choose a story that strikes you as particularly interesting. Write it succinctly.

3. Why did it happen? Fill in enough context to give the story meaning. Answer the question in a way that makes sense to you.

4. What might it mean? Recognizing that there is no one answer is an important step. Explore possible meanings rather than determine the meaning.

5. What are the implications for practice? Consider how your practice might change given any new understandings that have emerged from the earlier steps.

From “Reflection is at the Heart of Practice,” by S. Hole and G. H. McEntee, 1999, Educational Leadership, 56(8), p. 36. Adapted with permission.
APPENDIX F

CRITICAL REFLECTION JOURNAL
Critical reflection refers to the process of systematically and intentionally examining and evaluating assumptions that an individual makes about the world (Brookfield, 2017).

PHASE 1—journaling after face-to-face group meetings

1. Describe your experience reflecting on your cultural identity and personal biases this week.
   You may write about the activities you did, the discussions, your thoughts and feelings, any “aha moments” you had, connections to your life and teaching experience, when those connections happened, questions you have, how cultural identity applies to your work as a teacher, or anything else you feel relates to your participation in this project.

2. What was it like for you to engage in discussion of these topics within our community of practice group?
   You may write about your experiences and feelings both positive and negative, group dynamics, suggestions for future meetings, or any other thoughts, desires or concerns about our community of practice.
APPENDIX G

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For **Figure 3:**

Title: The Ethico-politics of Teacher Identity
Author: Matthew Clarke
Publication: Educational Philosophy and Theory
Publisher: Taylor & Francis
Date: Jan 1, 2009
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Author: James Paul Gee
Publication: REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
Publisher: SAGE Publications
Date: 01/01/2000
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Sincerely yours,

KATY WOGECK • Permissions Consultant for ASCD
1703 N. Beauregard Street • Alexandria, VA 22311-1714
P 240-478-4788

From: Janet B. Turner <Janet.B.Turner@live.mercer.edu>
Sent: Saturday, December 29, 2018 4:16 PM
To: permissions@ascd.org
Subject: Permission to reprint (Thread:1902977)

Dear Permissions Representative:

I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Mercer University entitled “Using a Community of Practice for Teacher Reflection on Cultural Identity.” I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation excerpts from the following:


The excerpts to be reproduced are from the sidebar on p. 36:

2. What happened? Choose a story that strikes you as particularly interesting. Write it succinctly.

3. Why did it happen? Fill in enough context to give the story meaning. Answer the question in a way that makes sense to you.

4. What might it mean? Recognizing that there is no one answer is an important step. Explore possible meanings rather than determine the meaning.

5. What are the implications for practice? Consider how your practice might change given any new understandings that have emerged from the earlier steps.
For Figure 1

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For use of Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS):

Dear Janet,
Thank you very much for your interest in the MTCS. Please see the attached document for items and scoring key. All I ask is that you send preliminary findings so that we can track the psychometric properties for the scale.

Best,
Lisa

From: "Janet B. Turner"<Janet.B.Turner@live.mercer.edu>
Date: Monday, November 5, 2018 at 10:25 AM
To: Lisa Spanierman <Lisa.Spanierman@asu.edu>
Subject: multicultural teaching competency scale

Hello Dr. Spanierman. I am a doctoral student at Mercer University in Atlanta working on a PhD in curriculum and instruction. I am proposing a study that explores what happens when teachers engage in a community of practice to examine their own cultural identities in relation to their work with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

I have read Spanierman et al. (2011), but I have not been able to locate the actual teacher belief inventory (multicultural teaching competency scale) except as an appendix in other studies. Is it available online or would you be able to send it to me? I am happy to send a formal letter requesting permission to use copyrighted material first if necessary.

Janet B. Turner
Mercer University


MTCS-Final-16-item-s...11.docx
For use of *Thinking about Our Own Identities*

Janet,

Thank you for contacting us. Please feel free to use the materials. We ask that you cite Teaching Tolerance and include a reference to our website on any reproductions. Here’s how we’d like the citation to appear:

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Hazel E. Griffin
Pronouns: she/her/hers
Administrative Assistant
Teaching Tolerance
[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

---

From: Janet Turner <jribburner@gmail.com>
Date: Tuesday, November 5, 2019 at 4:33 PM
To: Editor Tolerance <editor@tolerance.org>
Subject: Re: [Contact Us] - Reprints and Permissions

Ms. Griffin,

Thank you for your response.

I would like permission to reprint the attached document as an appendix in my dissertation. I used Teaching Tolerance’s Unpacking Identity ([https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/social-justice-standards-unpacking-identity](https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/social-justice-standards-unpacking-identity) online resources to create a handout to use with participants in a study in which teachers examined their own cultural identity and reflected on its influence on their teaching practice.

Please let me know if you need more information. I look forward to your response.

Gratefully,

Janet B. Turner
jribburner@gmail.com
For use of Social Identity Wheel and corresponding questions:

Text from the FAQ page (https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/f-a-q/) about permission and adapting:

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APPENDIX H

IRB APPROVAL
Friday, January 18, 2019

Janet B. Turner
TBE College of Education - Atlanta
Atlanta, GA 30345

RE: Using a Community of Practice for Teacher Reflection on Cultural Identity (H1812312)

Dear Turner:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 12-Dec-2018 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations 21 CFR 56.108(b) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 06, 07 per 45 CFR 46.110(b).

Your application was approved for one year of study on 18-Jan-2019. The protocol expires on 17-Jan-2020. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:
New Application for a case study using transcriptions, field notes, and documents from group meetings; participant written journals; text messages; and interviews as data sources to explore what happens when middle school teachers engage in a community of practice to critically reflect on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

NOTE: You MUST report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and ALL accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our Satisfaction Survey and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

[Signature]

Ava Chambless-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIR
Director of Research Compliance
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."
APPENDIX I

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators
Janet Bibelhauser Turner, Ph.D. Candidate, Mercer University, Curriculum and Instruction
3001 Mercer University Drive, Atlanta, GA 30341, (678) 595-1989
Vicki Luther, Ed.D., Mercer University, Tift College of Education
1501 Mercer University Drive, Macon, GA 31207, (478) 301-2243

Purpose of the Research
This research study is designed to explore what happens when middle school teachers work in a collaborative group to reflect on their own cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The data from this research will be used to develop a better understanding how teachers experience such reflection and their beliefs about the effects that reflection may have on their teaching practice.

The completed study will constitute the culmination of the researcher’s scholarly work toward earning a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in three to five face-to-face meetings with a small group of teachers to examine your cultural identity and personal biases as well as assumptions and beliefs about your teaching practice. Each meeting will last approximately 1 hour and be audio or video recorded. You will be asked to type six to eight reflective journals about your experiences in the group and about issues of diversity you encounter in your daily teaching practice. For 3-4 weeks, the researcher will send you a daily text message asking you to respond with information about how you experienced diversity or aspects of cultural identity during that particular school day. The researcher will also ask you to participate in two private interviews lasting 30-60 minutes, once at the close of the 8- to 10-week research period and again 4-6 weeks later.

Your participation will take approximately 7-11 hours spread over the initial 8- to 10-week research period and one follow up interview several weeks later. Group meetings will occur once a week for 3-5 weeks and last roughly 1 hour each. The two interviews will take 30-60 minutes each, weekly journal writing time may vary but is estimated to be 15-30 minutes once a week, and exchanging daily text messages with the researcher should take less than 5 minutes a day over the course of approximately 15 school days.
Potential Risks or Discomforts
In addition to the inconvenience caused by scheduled meetings, interviews, or journal writing, you may experience some personal or professional discomfort related to the process of engaging in critical reflection on cultural identity and your teaching practice. Participating in this research will require a degree of emotional risk-taking and willingness to question personal beliefs. The researcher will not intentionally cause any physical or emotional harm; however, discussing difficult issues involving racial, cultural, and linguistic differences with others may cause you to feel uncomfortable or result in changes in your personal beliefs and perspectives on teaching.

The researcher will make a concerted effort throughout the study to ensure that group meetings provide a safe space for participants to share personal experiences, listen to one another, and consider different perspectives. As a group member you will help establish group norms to encourage democratic discussion, refrain from judgement, and respect confidentiality.

The researcher will be available throughout the study to answer any questions and discuss any concerns you have about these risks. You may discontinue participation at any time.

Potential Benefits of the Research
The personal benefits of participating in this study may include developing a better understanding of how your own assumptions, beliefs, and culture influence your teaching practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

This study will contribute to the limited body of research on what happens when teachers engage in a community of practice to critically reflect on cultural identities and personal biases in relation to their practice with diverse students.

Confidentiality and Data Storage
The researcher will maintain anonymity for participants by using pseudonyms for all people and places throughout data collection, data analysis, and publication of findings.

All documents and data will be stored in secure locations to protect the confidentiality of participants. Electronic versions of all data will be stored in password-protected accounts or devices and routinely backed up. Selected pieces of data may be shared with the researcher’s doctoral committee at Mercer and research colleagues on a limited scale for peer checking.

Audio and video recordings will be maintained throughout the dissertation process and permanently deleted after the dissertation is approved for publication. Electronic versions of anonymized raw data and data analysis will be maintained for three years following the study’s completion as an audit trail.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Janet Turner.

After data collection is complete, participants may not withdraw because data has been made anonymous.

Questions about the Research
If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Dr. Vicki Luther: (478) 301-2243 or luther_vl@mercer.edu.
Audio or Video Taping
No audio, visual images, or names will be publicized or used outside of the scope of this study.

Reasons for Exclusion from this Study
Participants who do not teach culturally and linguistically diverse students and those who are reluctant to engage in critical reflection on identity and their teaching practice may be excluded from the study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

<table>
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<th>Research Participant Name (Print)</th>
<th>Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research Participant Signature</td>
<td>Person Obtaining Consent Signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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</tr>
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Mercer IRB Approval Date 01/18/2019
Protocol Expiration Date 01/17/2020