"Not Very Exciting": How Teachers with Best Intentions Create Social Reproduction in School

A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

California State University Channel Islands

In (Partial) Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters Of Arts

By

Alfredo Sanchez

May 2018

2018

Alfredo Sanchez
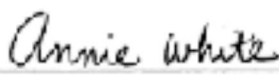
ii

Student Name: Alfredo Sanchez

Student ID: 000019462

Thesis/Project Title: "Not Very Exciting": How Teachers with Best Intentions Create Social

Reproduction in School

APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

_____ 5/23/2018
Adviser   Date

_____ Annie White 5/23/18
Second Reader   Date

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

_____ 5/24/18
Dean, School of Education   Date

iii

Acknowledgements

Going back to school to get a masters degree in curriculum and instruction was one of the best decisions I have ever made. This program helped me become a better educator. I have learned new strategies that have allowed me to help my students trust me and in turn they have begun to love to learn. I hope that I can share my knowledge with my colleagues so that we can help all students reach their potential. I thank CSUCI and all the faculty who made this possible and I hope to make them proud.

I would like to thank the six participants who made this study possible for allowing me to interview them so that they can share their stories. If it wasn't for them this thesis would not have been possible. All your stories were amazing and I am thankful for your support through this academic journey. You are all wonderful teachers and I admire everything you do for our students. I hope for nothing but the best for you and your career and I know you will continue to affect our students in a positive way.

My family was instrumental in helping me get through this educational journey. Thank you Elijah and Noah for being patient with me as I worked to finish this program. I love you guys. Thank you Mom for inspiring me and pushing me to always do my best.

I would like to give a special thanks to my little brother Aaron Sanchez. Thank you for helping me to be the best person I could be and keeping me on track as I finished this study. I will always love you and you will forever be in my heart. Rest in Peace little bro.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

For some time now society has been told that our public school system is failing our students. Since the 1980s, Americans have been told by our leaders that ours is "a nation at risk" because its schools and teachers have failed (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Since the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), attention has been drawn to the fact that some sub-groups of public school students do not achieve as well as their classmates (Shim, 2014). The dominant view for explaining why students of poverty fail has focused on the presumed deficiencies in children's language, culture, families, and communities that do not prepare them for the academic demands of schooling (Marling & Marling, 2015).

Many factors have led to this assumption, one of them being student diversity. Our student population has changed dramatically over the years and will continue to change in the future. According to Mercado (2001) changes in the US population happened because of the post 1965 immigration that increased the diversity among school aged children. There has also been an influx of English learners in classrooms. According to Pettie (as cited in Shim, 2014), English language learners (ELLs) are currently the fastest growing population among school age children. In Kelsey, Campuzano, and Lopez's (2015) study they found that there are more than 4.7 million English learners currently living in the US. Orellana's (2001) research found that one in five children in the US lives in an immigrant-headed household. This is a trend that will continue to create a diverse student population with students of color being the majority. Over 30 years ago, Berliner & Biddle (1995) predicted that by 2020 whites would comprise less than 50 percent of the student population. Their prediction has continued to become reality because according to Defina and Hannon's (2009) research they have found that recent census data shows

that racial and ethnic minorities are now a majority of the population in 1 out of 10 US counties. This is important because it has caused a mismatch between teachers and students. The US population is growing more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse while the teaching workforce is compromised of aging, still mostly white female teachers (Horsford & Clark, 2015).

The teaching workforce has not changed as significantly as the student population. Studies have shown that there is a demographic gap between teachers and students from different backgrounds including different language backgrounds (Gay, Milner, Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, as cited in Shim, 2014). Lower performing, under-resourced schools that mostly serve poor students of color are often staffed by beginning teachers who do not share their students' racial, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds (Pollack, 2012). The differences between populations have impacted students. English language learners' opportunities to learn are obstructed by teachers who lack the ability to understand and respond to language and cultural differences in the classroom (Mercado, 2001). These differences have led some in the teaching workforce to believe in deficit orientations. Deficit thinking is the belief that some people are inadequate due to poverty and/or inadequate socialization from home (Valencia as cited in Burciaga, 2015).

The prevalence of a deficit orientation to historically marginalized and educationally underserved children and adolescents has hurt students in our educational system. This orientation has kept certain students from equitable educational opportunities. According to Pollack (2012) educators' deficit thinking contributes to a school culture characterized by low expectations to a diminished sense of agency among teachers, and to the workplace socialization of beginning teachers and newcomers. Students who are viewed through a deficit lens will never have the same opportunities as those who are not because they are not taught in the same way.

2

Pollack (2012) saw that students of color were far less likely to participate in learning experiences that involve creative thinking, problem solving, and a more engaging and challenging curriculum. As long as some educators hold a deficit orientation certain students will continue to receive an unequal education.

There is a need for a different way of thinking about the struggling student. Instead of thinking of them as deficient or needing to be fixed, educators need to use what students bring to school with them as strengths. According to Marling and Marling (2015) teachers must use culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy to build on students' culture, language, and experiences as strengths that students bring to the classroom and infuse them into the curriculum and classroom environment while also confronting societal inequities and challenging both personal and institutional biases. There is also a need for more educators of color so that those students who are struggling have role models to look up to. Research has shown the importance of having racially representative teachers to students of color for their academic and emotional well-being (Sleeter, Sleeper & Mclauren, Kohli, as cited in Burciaga, 2015).

Many Americans have been encouraged for decades to believe that American education is so deficient that we should look at other nations' educational systems for ideas (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). While learning from other countries can influence educational strategies, we cannot do exactly what other countries do because of the diversity of our nation. What we must do is look at our student population and change our educational system to how can we meet those needs. Since students are changing this means that schools must change with them. All students are different so using a one size fits all method to teaching will not work (Sharma, 2016). Unless this trend is dramatically reversed, students of color and low socioeconomic background will continue to struggle in school and be deprived of a rich, challenging education.

3

Previous research on students who struggle academically has focused on student deficits (Burciaga, 2015) and strengths (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010), and how teachers affect students (Robinson & Lewis, 2017). Several studies have examined why students struggle academically in school (Chambers, 2009; Lee, 2002; Mercado, 2001). Dee (2016) found that gender, racial, and ethnic differences between teachers and their students contributed to the achievement gap (as cited in Ratcliff, Costner, Caroll, Jones, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2016). Other studies have focused on teaching strategies or methods that affect student academic success. Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, and Pianta (as cited in Ratcliff, et al., 2017) found that many children in at-risk groups were off task at higher rates in large group instruction that emphasized rote memorization or assigned individual work. Shim (2014) found that teachers' attitudes towards ELLs affect classroom actions, interactions, and pedagogical decisions that affect students' academic achievement. This body of research has led to numerous explanations as to why students struggle in school and has given many different strategies that teachers can use to help those students with their academics.

Less research attention has been directed to how teachers' attitudes, strategies, and behaviors are affected by the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically. Pollack (2012) states there is a need for teachers to both reflect critically on their own racial identities, backgrounds, and cultural assumptions, and to gain knowledge and an understanding about the students, families, and communities they serve. Although there has been much attention on studying why certain students struggle in school academically, more research is needed into the effects of teachers reflecting on their practices. Young (2010) points out that the void in scholarly research is not in the knowledge of theories but in the knowledge of how to implement these theories so that teachers can find positive ways to impact their students.

Another interest to researchers studying why some students struggle academically in school has been socioeconomic status (SES), culture, and family values. For example, there has been much talk about PreK-12 education in the US and the racial achievement gap, whereby Black and Latina/o students are more likely to be in low level classes (Horsford & Clark, 2015). There is clearly a need for research to find ways to help teachers educate all of their students. Jeffy and Cooper (2011) state that the goal of educational research should be to find ways to teach all students regardless of their ethnicity, race, cultural background, or community of origin.

Existing studies of why certain students struggle in school academically have focused on student and teacher deficiencies (Mcdermott, 1997; Ratcliff et el., 2016; Shim, 2014). Studies about the academic success of Latina/o and ELLs have focused on pedagogical approaches, teacher perceptions and expectations, and cultural and linguistic differences (Masewicz & Vogel, 2010). Qualitative investigations provide detailed views of teachers in their own words, multiple perspectives, and specific views on the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically in school (Creswell, 2012). Such qualitative inquiry also offers the opportunity for teachers to reflect on teaching strategies, behaviors, and attitudes as they answer interview questions.

By examining strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically, using qualitative approaches, we can better understand how these strengths and weaknesses affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors. With this understanding, researchers can see how teachers perceive strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically. It will also allow teachers to reflect on their own practices. Administrators and teachers can plan interventions to prevent or change negative attitudes toward students who struggle academically.

This study can help school officials assist teachers to find best practices or intervention programs.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Nationwide Latino/a student academic performance consistently falls below that of other students (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). Educators must find what causes students of color

and/or low SES background to struggle academically. They also must find strategies to help all students perform well in school. This study will look at what teachers are currently doing to help students of color and/or low SES who struggle and how those strategies are affecting them.

The research question of this study is: How do the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors of teachers at my school? The literature review examines previous studies that look at strength-based strategies, attitudes and expectations, deficit narratives, and the achievement gap. Provided is an overview of the literature that relates to the research question. Connections to the literature are made as well as concepts that are important to this research area. The criteria used for analyzing the literature included how relevant the research was to the study at hand and how each of these studies related to the others that the author reviewed. Research that was excluded from this study were behaviors that have to do with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and behavioral disabilities.

Overview of the Context of Literature

The areas that I have selected to include in this review of the literature are: deficit based strategies, strength based strategies, attitudes and expectations, and the achievement gap. I chose these areas in order to find out what researchers have discovered about why students struggle, how teachers affect students, the gap that exists between those who struggle and those who don't, and how some teachers help those struggling students succeed. Research findings in these areas helped guide my research on how students who struggle academically affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors.

Much research has been done on why some students do not succeed in school academically (Sharma, 2016; Mercado, 2001; Chambers, 2009). Deficit thinking is the idea that

students, particularly of low socioeconomic status and of color, fail academically because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that prevent them from learning in school (Valencia & Black 2002). Some educators believe that when students misbehave or do poorly in school they need to be fixed because the problem is with the student or their family and not the school (Wiener, 2006). For decades, critical theorists who believe that schools are sites of social reproduction rather than of individual transformation have claimed that US culture does not mean to offer equal opportunity for all, but to keep everyone learning how to stay in the same place generation after generation (McDermott, 1997). Teachers who view students through a deficit lens do not give their students an equal education because they teach them less (Marling & Marling, 2015). Some scholars have found that the American public education system unconsciously supports low standards, negative labels, and overall low expectations for students who are already struggling (Sharma 2016; Chambers, 2009; Ratcliff et el., 2016). These scholars have found that some students have a deficit and need to be taught at a low level, so their curriculum needs to be watered down in order for them to be successful.

There has been plenty of research done on strength-based strategies that help students achieve in school. According to Horsford and Clark (2015) strength-based strategies create a schooling experience where all students have an equal opportunity to learn. In order to help all students achieve in school teachers must find ways to use students' strengths to help them learn. Some of these strategies include Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Funds of Knowledge. These strategies use the knowledge (culture) that students bring with them to school. The Funds of Knowledge approach uses students' background, knowledge, and experiences to create lessons that are culturally responsive (Kelsey, Campazano, & Lopez, 2015). There is evidence to show that strength-based strategies have helped those students who have struggled academically in

school achieve. Hope Academy is a K-8 school in an urban area in Arizona where the student population is 60% Native American and 35% Latino. Hope Academy went from being an underperforming school to a performing school by giving teachers professional development that focused on building learning communities, analyzing the diversity among English Language Learners (ELLs), and using strength-based-strategies (Kelsey, Campazano, & Lopez, 2015).

According to research, teaching attitudes and behaviors play an important role in educating children. A teacher's attitude and expectations affect the way they teach their students (Ratcliff et el., 2017). These attitudes and expectations can come from teachers talking to each other about students at their school. In schools teachers talk about experiences that can strengthen an educator's belief that students' academic struggles are caused by students' culture, class, and supposed deficiencies that teachers have no control over (Pollack, 2012). The talk amongst teachers in PreK-12 schools can affects some students in a negative way because what teachers say can influence other teachers to hold a deficit view toward those students (2012). Teachers need to reflect on their own practices and attitudes in order for them to find ways to educate even those students who are struggling academically in school. Pollack (2012) argues that there is a need for teachers to reflect on their own racial identities, backgrounds, and cultural assumptions, while at the same time gaining knowledge and understanding about the students, families, and communities they serve. An educator who has high expectations will have a different attitude when dealing with their students. These educators will hold all students accountable and will help them to succeed in school. The Optimum Learning Environment (OLE) project brought a rich curriculum to students in an urban, English as a Second Language (ESL) special education program and got incredible results (Marling & Marling, 2015). The

9

OLE is a curriculum that uses student choice, active engagement in student learning, meaningful and purposeful learning, and learning in a social context (Marling & Marling, 2015).

Another area of literature that I will review is the achievement gap. The achievement gap is the difference on standardized tests between students of different gender, socioeconomic status, race, and disability (Ratcliff, Costner, Caroll, Jones, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2017). Many researchers have stated that there is an achievement gap between students because some students do not do as well academically as others on standardized tests (Lee, 2002; Ratcliff et el., 2016). There are also many other researchers who disagree with the term achievement gap and believe that there are many other gaps, or factors that contribute to students' struggles in school (Chambers, 2009; Dilworth & Brown, 2001; Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016). Some of these factors include schooling conditions and practices, socioeconomic and family conditions, and culture and student behaviors.

Deficit-based orientations/weaknesses

Much research has been done on the deficit-based orientation that teachers can hold toward historically marginalized and educationally under-served students and how it affects students from learning at the same pace as those who succeed academically in school (Burciaga, 2015; Pollack, 2012; Sharma, 2016). This research argues that students struggle in school academically because they have a deficit (Sharma, 2016). As previously mentioned, deficit thinking is the idea that students, particularly of low socioeconomic status and of color, fail academically because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that prevent them from learning in school (Valencia & Black, 2002). These ideas blame students, parents, and culture as the reason why some students do not succeed in school. Deficit thinking does not allow some teachers and administrators from seeing the positive values, abilities, and positive

10

dispositions of some students, and leads to the stereotyping and prejudging of them (Portelli, as cited in Sharma, 2016).

In today's schools the struggling student is blamed for their inability to learn at the same pace as those who perform well in school. Deficit thinking treats some students as insignificant, disadvantaged, and deprived through misinformation and misconstructions (Portelli, as cited in Sharma, 2016). Deficit-oriented teachers believe that some students cannot learn because they lack the language, have cultural differences, or have parents who do not care about education. These deficit-based beliefs have created negative schooling experiences for the learner that limit social class mobility (Sharma, 2016). People with this orientation refuse to see that race, racism, and white privilege create an unequal education for some (Scanlan & Johnson, 2015).

Some cultures are not viewed as assets by schools (Sener & Cokçaliskan, 2018). Instead these cultures are viewed as deficiencies. Schools have cultural norms and values that create and sustain social inequalities for some (Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). Students of color, poor or working class students, and students with disabilities are constantly unseen in education (Horsford & Clark, 2015). Schools do not typically use minority student cultures in education so these students lack a sense of belonging in the school game (Scanlan & Johnson, 2015), and because of this they have to deal with severe prejudice and conflicts between home and school values (Gibson, 1997). At school minority students face many barriers like low socioeconomic status, different home language than school language, tracking systems, home and school cultural differences, and the prejudiced attitudes of the dominant culture (Gibson, 1997).

Some teachers do not talk to parents to get to know them and learn about their culture; instead they look at the community as a deficit to student learning. Research has found that many educators have a hard time creating relationships with parents of color (Horsford & Clark, 2015).

11

Theses teachers tend to blame the parents, the language, and the culture for the struggles that these students have in school. Throughout history and even recently many individuals in scholarly literature and media outlets have stated that Hispanic American parents, particularly of low socioeconomic status background, do not value education (Valencia & Black, 2002). Valencia and Black's (2002) research refutes this common belief. Good, Masewicz, and Vogel's (2010) research also found that the power and influence of Hispanic parents on their children's education has been ignored and/or underestimated by many.

Strengths-Based Pedagogies

Researchers have identified Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), Critical Pedagogy, and Funds of Knowledge as pedagogies that help students succeed in school academically. Critical Pedagogy has students analyze events and situations from different perspectives to understand how they position students in the world, and to use this knowledge to better their lives (Mercado, 2001). Culturally relevant pedagogy helps to strengthen students academically by encouraging the development and support of cultural competence, and by developing a critical consciousness (Mercado, 2001). Funds of knowledge is a culturally responsive approach to teaching that helps educators identify and then build on children's existing knowledge (Marling & Marling, 2015). These practices use the strengths that students bring with them in order to help them succeed academically in school.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was first introduced in 1995 by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Her definition is:

A pedagogy of oppression not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students

must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the current status quo of the social order. (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011 p. 67)

Ladson-Billing's research said that teachers should create a community of learners, have high expectations, and teach students to question knowledge as a concept made by society (Young, 2010). CRP should promote academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Schools must incorporate the home community of students, their cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). CRP promotes the understanding and knowledge of a student's culture along with the culture of those who try to hold them back (Young, 2010). Students must question the power structures that are created and how they are maintained in our society (Milner, 2011). According to CRP, teachers must hold all students to high standards and promote collaboration between students.

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) came up with five themes for a culturally relevant pedagogical framework. One theme is about identity and achievement. In this theme the social and cultural capital that students bring to the classroom are identified. The next theme is about equity and excellence. It is about students getting what they need in order to be successful. Another theme is about developmental appropriateness, teaching styles, learning styles, and the cultural variation of psychological needs. The next theme is about teaching the whole child. This is done by developing students' skills in cultural context, bridging home and school community, providing learning outcomes, supporting a learning community, and empowering students. The final theme is about the student and teacher relationship. Students need to know that the teacher

cares for them. This is shown through interactions with students, creating relationships, and creating a caring atmosphere in the classroom (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Ladson-Billings has continued to expand on her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, noting that CRP is the ability to link principles of learning with a deep understanding of culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In her recent research, Ladson-Billings has come to the conclusion that culturally relevant pedagogy will continue to change with time. Her reason for this is her understanding that culture is constantly changing. Ladson-Billings (2014) found that every generation has a different idea about what their culture exemplifies. Ladson-Billings also states that CRP should be ever changing. If we stop growing we will die and more importantly our students will wither and die in our presence (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This she refers to as academic death, which means that teachers will stop trying to reach all students and students of color will continue to drop out, get suspended, and/or continue to fail academically.

The Funds of Knowledge approach is another strategy to help teachers with students of color. This method values learning about student homes and communities so that learning can build on students' cultural resources (Mercado, 2001). In the Funds of Knowledge approach educators take students' background knowledge and experiences and use them to develop a curriculum that is culturally responsive (Kelsey et al., 2015). Educators must create curriculum that is demanding while using students' cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive learning must include students' cultures in curriculum. In order to improve student academic achievement teachers need to be responsive to student cultural backgrounds and learning styles (Dilworth & Brown, 2001). One way to do this is by using standards that make sure quality teaching is going on. After all, curriculum standards were created to provide all students with similar skills and knowledge in all subjects (Dilworth & Brown, 2001).

The following are examples are of districts and schools that have succeeded through strength-based approaches:

The school, a large suburban/urban school in the mid-Atlantic region of the US, that hired Mabel Washington was facing closure because the school was doing so badly. She created an extended family school culture by walking students home and inviting parents to participate in school activities. She set up events where teachers and parents could get to know each other. She got the help of civil servants to volunteer as mentors for the students at the school and in two years her school was in the top 4% of elementary schools in the state for academic performance, grade completion, and test scores (Horsford & Clark, 2015).

Carlos Perez was hired to be a superintendent of 57 schools in a rural-urban school district in the Southwest. None of the schools in the district were identified as being above average according to state test results. He allowed teachers to teach however they felt was best for their students, but if students did not perform teachers would be held responsible. The teachers who liked this way of teaching did great. The teachers that felt that students in that community could not learn because of their race, language and socioeconomic status failed. He also created a beat the test culture in his district. His schools promoted the idea that together they could beat the test. The last two hours of the school day concentrated on test preparation that focused on methods and the psychology of test taking. The students in his school district, which were mostly of Mexican heritage, outperformed students in affluent and white school districts in the state (Horsford & Clark, 2015).

Superintendent Manuel Vargas wanted to change the way that Puerto Rican students were being viewed. The first thing he did was build a multicultural group of inclusive principals. He hired principals that represented the minority student population at his school district. Through

15

the principals he promoted an educational philosophy about thinking how students actually learn instead of how they have been expected to learn. He said all children can learn, all children should, in fact, be learning and if they are not, then something needs to change. The students in this district began to thrive after these changes were made (Horsford & Clark, 2015).

Hope Academy is a K-8 school where the student population is 60% Native American and 35% Latino. It is in an Arizona school district and is an urban school. It was an underperforming school and administrators had kept the community away from making decisions. This created a mistrust between the school and the community. Then Regina Castillo became principal at this school. The first thing she did was go to parents' homes to listen to their concerns. She used parents' cultures as a strength in order to bring the community and school together. She also brought the cultures of the school population together by decorating school buildings with Native American and Mexican artifacts, and she provided English classes for parents. She made EL inclusive practices for Native American and Mexican students, and started a culturally responsive curriculum by including students' backgrounds and language (Kelsey, Campazano, & Lopez, 2015).

Teaching Attitudes and Expectations

Two things that drive a teacher's instruction are attitudes and expectations. A teacher's attitude toward students goes hand in hand with the expectations they have for students. If teachers have an attitude where they believe that some students can't learn then those teachers will have low expectations for those students. What teachers know and can do is one of the most important influences on what students learn (Mercado, 2001). This will drive the teacher's instruction and create different learning outcomes for students. There is documented evidence

16

that the treatment of learner differences in schools results in an educational advantage for some and a disadvantage for others (Mercado, 2001).

Some teacher training programs do not prepare teachers for student diversity, so when the teacher begins teaching they feel as if they cannot understand their students (Burciaga, 2015). Most teachers are not prepared for the diverse student (Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). Some colleges are not preparing teachers and administrators, who are mostly white, for leadership that includes all students (Kelsey et al., 2015).

Here is an example of a teacher who believed in high expectations for all of his students and how he got them to believe in him and themselves so that they could succeed academically. Milner (2011) observed a white male teacher, Mr. Hall, in a diverse urban classroom. He observed this teacher to see how he was able to relate with his students and help them become better learners. In the short amount of time that Mr. Hall was teaching at the school he was able to earn the respect of all students, and was chosen as teacher of the year. Mr. Hall was able to create relationships inside and outside of the classroom. He created relationships inside of the classroom by not treating his students the same in every situation. He understood that students are not the same and that they all have different home situations that affect how they behave and their ability to do homework. This is why he gave students several opportunities to fix behaviors or turn in projects. He connected with students through television, like the Discovery Channel, where they could come together in class and talk about things they had watched on television the day before. He also created relationships out of school by going to students' games or playing basketball with them outside of class. His students came to realize that he was there to help them succeed.

Mr. Hall also allowed students to learn more about his personal life. At first students thought he could not understand what they were going through because he was white. He told them stories about his childhood so that they could understand that as a child his family was poor. After that they realized that he could relate with some of their problems. Mr. Hall told them stories about his wife and children so that they could get to know him as a person. He also allowed for students to tell him personal stories about their lives. This allowed for community building in the classroom and helped the teacher and students to become empathetic to each other's situations. His idea was if you show interest in students then students will show interest in what you are teaching (Milner, 2011).

Achievement Gap

Many scholars have critiqued the achievement gap discourse because it places responsibility for success on individual students and absolves institutions and dominant culture attitudes, policies, and practices in society (Chambers, 2009; Dilworth & Brown, 2001; Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016). Tollefson and Magdaleno (2016) have suggested that many other gaps deserve our attention. Some of these gaps include the receivement gap, opportunity gap, and the acknowledgment gap (Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016). The receivement gap looks at what students have received in their educational journey, and puts attention on the structural forces that play a role in the educational development of students (Chambers, 2009). The opportunity gap has to do with the kinds of services students get, such as the quality of teachers (Chambers, 2009). The acknowledgment gap has to do with the failure of educators to see how inequalities such as safe housing, lack of food, and poor school facilities and resources affect student performance (Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016). These gaps do not put the blame on students for

their failures, but look at how factors that cannot be controlled by students affect learning opportunities.

The achievement gap is measured by national average test score differences between racial and ethnic groups based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and SAT results (Lee, 2002). There are many factors that contribute to the so called achievement gap. One factor that contributes to widening or keeping the achievement gap the same is that low performing students are not receiving the challenging curriculum that their more academically successful peers are receiving (Chambers, 2009). They don't receive the same curriculum because they are thought of as incapable of learning at such a high level. The US has created a system where students do not have equal educational opportunities. School programs that contribute to this inequality are ability grouping, tracking and pull out programs that only teach basic skills (Dilworth & Brown, 2001). These programs limit students to a basic education where they are taught basic skills. The students in these programs are denied a rich academic curriculum that would benefit them the most (Mercado, 2001). Until teachers understand that quality classroom learning affects student achievement, teachers will not be able to help struggling students be successful in school (Ratcliff, Costner, Caroll, Jones, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2016). Practices such as these fail to lift struggling students out of remediation and end up contributing to the problem of social reproduction through education. This according to Serna (2017) means that schooling itself is one of the main ways of reinforcing inequalities in our society.

American public education systems often unconsciously support low standards, negative labels, and overall low expectations for marginalized students (Sharma, 2016). Many of the factors that hinder students from learning can't be controlled by students. These factors include

socioeconomic status, unequal school programs, school resources, differences in culture, language, ethnicity, motivation, segregation, and lack of access to technology.

Connections to the Literature

There are many contributors who have increased the body of knowledge that is being reviewed about how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle in school academically affect teaching behaviors, strategies, and attitudes. Studies have proven that all students can learn when given the opportunity (Ball & Bass, 1999; Milner, 2011). Some research argues that students do not succeed in school because they have some sort of deficit (Ratcliff et al., 2017; Sharma, 2016). Other research argues that under the right circumstances all students can succeed in school academically (Wiener, 2006; Valencia & Black, 2002; Taylor Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). Strength-based practices have been shown to support the growth of academic performance of students (Young, 2010). In addition this body of literature informs professional investigations in educational leadership, in a practical way.

Conclusion

Previous research (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Kelsey et al., 2015) has informed us that many students of color and/or low SES background struggle in school academically. While some of these studies (Chambers, 2009; Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016) have focused on factors that affect students beyond the teachers' control, more research is needed on how teachers can help students in the classroom environment. Conducting a study to see how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle in school academically affect teaching behaviors, strategies, and attitudes will add to the existing literature. By studying how students' strengths and weaknesses affect teaching behaviors, strategies, and attitudes teachers can reflect on their own practices in order to help all their students to be successful academically. The next chapter

defines the methodology for this study as both qualitative and narrative, including details about participants, setting, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Question

How do the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically in school affect teachers' attitudes, strategies, and behaviors?

Project Overview

This qualitative research project answered the research question: How do the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically in school affect teachers' attitudes, strategies, and behaviors? Throughout my master of education program I have read about how certain children succeed in school while others do not. This study explored how teachers at my school viewed students' strengths and weaknesses and how they used them to help students succeed in school academically. This will add to the existing literature and can assist educational leaders in helping teachers in the educational setting. The rest of this chapter will include the design, participants, setting, instrument used, procedures of the study, an analysis of the data, and a conclusion of this research.

Philosophical Orientation

A qualitative narrative study was a good match for this research question to help understand how teachers at my school view the strengths and weaknesses of struggling students

at our school. Qualitative studies explore the culture of a group of people and explore experiences of individuals to develop a theory (Creswell, 2011). I used interviews to collect the data because according to Creswell (2011) qualitative research relies on general interviews so that participant views are not restricted and they allow participants to describe detailed personal information. During the interview process I interviewed participants using the one-on-one strategy because it allowed them to share their ideas with me comfortably without having to worry about what others might think. I also used open ended questions because I was looking for themes that overlap among the population of teachers. Open-ended questions allow for the exploration of reasons and answers, and allow for participant experiences to be voiced without restriction from any ideas of the researcher or past research (Crewell, 2011).

I decided to look through the lens of Critical Theory which aims to disrupt the process of social reproduction by looking at power relationships among different people while trying to stop or reduce inequalities (Bradley-Levine & Carr, 2015). The goal of Critical Theory is to help us to understand and overcome social structures that dominate or oppress people (Britannica, 2015). Critical Theories aim to emancipate and enlighten people so they will be aware of hidden coercion so that they can free themselves from it and determine where their true interests lie (Guess, 1981). An example of how Critical Theory can be used is to explore how some school practices have served to keep certain groups of people in the same socioeconomic status. As previously mentioned, social reproduction is facilitated by schools and other social sites that perpetuate class stratification (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). Some teaching strategies lead to the social reproduction of power and privilege, making it very difficult for people from low SES background from going after or being successful in higher education (Serna & Woulfe, 2017).

Critical Theory is a perfect lens to look through because it can help researchers question curriculum theories, models, and curriculum development that contribute to the problem of social reproduction, and teachers can participate in changes (Hargreaves & Margarida, 2003). One of my hopes is that teachers who read this thesis will think about how the education system might be hurting certain students and for them to hopefully come up with ways to help those students who are struggling academically, like using culturally relevant pedagogy. The hope is that teachers will be enlightened as to how to help students who are struggling and to free those same students from academic failure.

Assumptions

I began this study with the assumption that teachers are affected by struggling students' strengths and weaknesses. The teacher can be affected in a positive or negative way by students and this in turn can affect a teacher's attitude, strategies, and behaviors. This helps to guide the way teachers decide to go about teaching their class. It was also assumed that a teacher will be mostly consistent in holding either a strength-based orientation or deficit-based orientation when teaching students who are struggling academically.

Another assumption is that I believe that my findings from interviews of these teachers will allow other teachers to reflect on teaching practices. During this time a teacher can either reflect in a positive or negative way. These interviews can help a teacher realize if they are incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy or need to improve teaching practices in order to help all students be successful.

Research Design

Elements of research design for this qualitative study are described in the following sections on setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Setting

This study took place at an elementary school located in Southern California. This elementary school is located in an area with low socioeconomic status. The qualitative research project took place on the elementary school campus where the participants work. The total number of students enrolled at the school is 593. Of these students 279 are female and 314 are male. This means that 47% of the students at this school are female and 54% of the students are male. Of the students enrolled at the school 575 identify as Hispanic, 16 identify as White (not Hispanic), and two identify as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. This correlates to 96.9% hispanic, 2.8% White (not Hispanic), and 0.3% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. There are only two languages that students' families speak at home: English and Spanish. The home language of 183 of students is English while 410 speak Spanish at home. In other words, 31% of students home language as English and 69% Spanish (H. Gonzalez, personal communication, 1/22/2018).

Participant Selection

Teacher participants were recruited to be interviewed based on race, ethnicity, language diversity, experience teaching in the same grade level for at least three years, and are teachers at the elementary school where the research was conducted. Teachers were recruited to be interviewed through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is when a researcher selects participants who are willing and available to be studied (Creswell, 2011). I approached teachers who met these criteria and asked them if they wanted to be part of the qualitative research project that looked at the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically. A copy of the interview protocol is attached as Appendix A.

To minimize risk, permission from the school's administration was granted before the interviews began. A copy of the gatekeeper letter to the administration is attached as Appendix B.

Once permission was granted from the administrators, the action research project began. (See appendices A-E for documents related to this qualitative research project.)

Participants

The participants in my study were all teachers from the same school where I teach. I interviewed six teachers from the school from different grade levels starting in first grade up to fifth grade. I interviewed three male and three female teachers, all of whom had taught at the school for more than five years. Of the teachers that I interviewed three identified themselves as Hispanic, two identified themselves as Caucasian, and one identified as Asian. Two of the teachers were bilingual speaking both Spanish and English. The rest of the teachers spoke only English. The pseudonyms I gave to the teachers in the study are Mrs. West, Mr. Diggs, Mr. Sax, Ms. Buzz, Mrs. Woody, and Mr. Montana. I am intentionally refraining from adding any additional information about participants to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

I collected data by interviewing teachers about how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically affect teachers' attitudes, strategies, and behaviors toward those students. The semi structured interview consisted of six questions. The interview was semi-structured because that allowed me to use follow up questions if needed or if I needed to clarify any statements. These questions helped me get information about how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically affect teachers. The interviews also helped teachers to reflect on how these strengths and weaknesses affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors.

Interviews

Once written consent was granted and all the consent forms were reviewed I began interviewing one teacher at a time in the private setting of my classroom. I performed the interviews myself to ensure that they be performed properly. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. I interviewed teachers in a one-on-one setting so that they were comfortable and answered questions naturally without fear of their teaching practices being judged. I was an insider when collecting data at the site because I conducted the interviews. I am also an insider due to the fact that I work at the school where the research took place.

I used a recorder to record the interviews. The recordings captured the entire answers and intonations of participants' answers. After I recorded the interviews I went back and listened to all the responses in order to transcribe the interviews.Then I coded the transcriptions.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data looking through the lens of Critical Theory. I chose this lens, as previously described, to discover whether teaching attitudes and behaviors of the participants would support or challenge the problem of schools contributing to social reproduction.

Coding Data

According to Creswell (2012) coding is the processes of labeling transcribed interviews to find common themes in the data. I used two process called text segment and in vivo coding to come up with themes. Text segment coding is when you look for sentences or paragraphs that relate then give them a single code (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) describes in vivo codes as codes that were created by using participants' actual words.

After transcribing the interviews I used the computer program, HyperResearch, to code the data using text segment coding and in vivo coding, as described above. This allowed me to focus on coding pieces of information making sure that the data guided my study and not my

beliefs or theories. Text segment coding allowed me to find relevant themes within sentences or paragraphs that otherwise could have been overlooked. Through this process, I created a list of 34 codes (see Appendix E). I used these codes to help me come up with the following themes from the coded data, which are discussed in detail in chapter 4: (1) small group instruction, (2) factors that contribute to academic struggles, (3) strengths of students who struggle, and (4) the term "low students." I used these codes to help me identify the themes from the coded data, which are described in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

In order to show the trustworthiness of this project I used the following strategies to ensure that my findings were credible, dependable, and transferable.

Member Checks

By allowing the interviewees to look at their transcribed interviews, I addressed and hopefully eliminated the chance of making their words into my own. After I finished transcribing the interviews I went to each teacher and had them read what I had transcribed. I did this to be sure that I accurately transcribed their words before I began to code. This process allowed teachers to review what they said during the interview and allowed them to reflect on teaching practices.

Researcher's Biases

I went through the questions with the participants before I began the interviews. This helped participants understand the purpose of the qualitative research project. I also used a semi-structured interview so that teachers had the opportunity to make their statements clear. This allowed me to use follow up questions instead of putting words in teachers' mouths, and allowed me to minimize any biases from this qualitative research project.

As I wrote my findings I have done my best to be sure that my position is clear to readers, specifically in making my philosophical and theoretical positions clear and in describing my research design and process in detail.

I have conducted this study in the hopes that it will benefit not only the participants and myself, but also educators in other settings who are concerned with similar issues. I have tried to describe the context of this study with sufficient detail so that others can determine for themselves whether my findings are of any use in their context. I have done everything that I can to ensure the credibility, dependability, and transferability of this project by using the strategies that I described above.

Limitations

One limitation of this qualitative research project was the small sample size of six teachers. This limitation may not reflect or capture all of the experiences of the teachers at my school. More interviews could produce more and different information. Another limitation was the limited amount of time I had to conduct this study. With more time I could have reinterviewed the same teachers at a later time to ask them if the teaching strategies they explained helped those struggling students to be more successful in school.

Conclusion

This research may demonstrate new information about the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically and how these strengths and weaknesses affect teaching behaviors, strategies, and attitudes in a low socioeconomic school. The next chapter will report on findings that emerged from the data collected from this qualitative research study.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter will describe the findings of the data collected and identify the themes found from the one-on-one interviews. Names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Themes Arising from the One-On-One Interviews

A cautious and planned coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews uncovered themes that were common among participants when talking about how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors. The themes that emerged from interview data were (1) small group instruction, (2) factors that contribute to academic struggles, (3) strengths of students who struggle, and (4) the term "low students."

Small Group Instruction

One theme that was common in the interviews of teachers was they all used small group instruction to help those students who are struggling academically. Each of the teachers explained how they grouped students into small groups of between five to eight students. The criterion teachers used for creating small groups was , in their words, "like weaknesses." In these small groups teachers worked on remedial or rote skills usually having to do with reading.

Mr. Diggs stated, "So my groups are all small because of my low class size and they are all grouped by similar needs off their weaknesses." Mrs. West described her grouping method as:

> If they are weak in an area they work with me in order to improve. It's not very exciting. They have to come back and sit in a little group. There is not a lot of independence. There is not a lot of freedom.

When asked why she does this she stated, "They don't have the skills. We are really big on the foundational skills and if they don't have it they keep working on it." Ms. Buzz described

her method as, "They don't want to pay attention because they're really not comprehending the subject matter that I'm teaching. So I bring them back and put them into smaller groups and give more explicit lessons."

When Mr. Sax was asked about how student weaknesses affect his teaching attitude he stated:

They are just like a real indicator of where I am going to start because I have to teach them the curriculum. On the other hand I have to break away time, whether it be universal access time or another time, when I am giving them stuff which is on their grade level. I set aside time to teach them at their level so that they are going to really benefit from it. With all these students I am most effective with one on one or working with them two at a time or three or five at a time for these type of students that are really at-risk.

Mrs. Woody described her grouping method as:

I can have a small group and I can actually teach those students the skills that they are lacking. With them I'm still doing decoding and reading in a small reading group because that's what they need. I do that because I want them to catch up before they go to middle school. I use graphic organizers because those have phonics lessons.

Mr. Montana stated, "I use weaknesses to group my students into small groups so we can work on the foundational skills they are lacking." Each one of these teachers' stories explained how they use weaknesses to group students into small groups where they can work on building up those weaknesses. All of the teachers felt that it was important to build foundational skills so that students could have an opportunity to succeed in school academically.

Factors that Contribute to Academic Struggles

Another theme that I found after analyzing the one-on-one interviews was about the factors that contribute to a student's academic struggles at school. All of the teachers talked about how parents, learning disabilities, or lack of focus are factors that cause students to fall behind in school and begin to struggle academically. According to the teachers these are the main reasons why the students in their classes are struggling in school. One common factor that teachers said contributes to a student's academic struggles was about parents. Mr. Montana stated:

> Two of my lowest kids, one is a very limited English speaker and does not have much support at home. The other lowest one is an English only but doesn't have a lot of support at home. His parents both work and I don't think his home life is very stable. So he does have some behavioral issues that keep him from making enough progress.

Mrs. West explained:

> Do you want to know the reasons that I think they are struggling academically? Well, I have a handful. Part of them are struggling because they have no family support. Just kind of raised wild. They go to an after school program of some kind and then when they go home nobody reads with them. No one looks at their backpacks. No one is taking interest in these children.

Later on in the interview she also stated:

> A couple of my kids that I'm thinking of are the ones that are struggling raising themselves. They don't have a lot of family support, so they don't know how to behave in a classroom. They don't know how to sit in a chair with their feet down, they don't know how to focus. They are the ones rolling around making funny faces. They don't know when how to behave in the classroom setting.

When asked what she meant by family support she said:

> They are not fed. Their clothes aren't clean. They don't have questions asked like, "What did you do in school today?" They don't have family helping them with homework, or reading to them. They go to bed dirty and don't have the love that parents give them.

Mrs Woody explained:

> I try my best here because I know that at home they barely read. So here is where they are going to be able to learn. I know that some of them don't do their homework. All we do is hope that they learn in a small guided group.

> Although Mr. Sax did not specifically blame parents for struggles, he did state that

outside factors cause the student to struggle:

> I'm just going to refer to one as Student A. This student has been struggling a lot because of the emotional pressures in that student's daily life. A lot of it is outside the classroom, which brings up a very high affective filter and a lack of being receptive to even normal things, like sitting down. It takes a while to get that person into a place where they're going to be receptive. I would say a lot of emotional affective issues are making it hard.

> Mr. Diggs talked about how parents also struggle to help their children with homework,

saying, "I can't expect parents to help their children with homework because they either don't understand the work, or do not have time to help." Ms. Buzz had similar comments, "Most of the parents at this school are limited in their English so it is difficult for them to help their children with homework."

All participants commented upon lack of parental support. Most of them believed that the way parents raise their children at home affects the way they behave in school. They believe that

since parents can't control their children at home these behaviors spill over in the classroom making it hard for the teacher to help these students succeed.

Strengths of Students Who Struggle

The third theme that I found from the interviews was that they all described the strengths of students who struggle academically as creative. All participants said that these students did well on anything that dealt with things like art, computers, or being physical in nature. Although they described these students' strengths in different ways, in the end it was clear that their strengths did not have to do with any academic part of school.

Mrs. West described her struggling students' strength as, "The ones that really struggle academically are very artistically creative. So when they see shapes and colors and designs they are really good, but when it comes to language or numbers, that's where they disconnect." She also said:

> So I have this one student that is very creative, definitely struggling academically. He did a writing prompt and because there was an art project attached to it he didn't worry so much about being able to do it, because there was coloring. The writing was actually a lot better. He wasn't stressed out about the writing.

When Mrs. Buzz was asked about the strengths of students who struggle academically in her class she answered:

> Some of their strengths could be in arts. They're artistic. In writing they just can't get it down on paper. It's not necessarily that they don't know anything. It's that their strengths might be in speaking. In writing maybe they don't know conventions or spelling or descriptive words.

Mrs. Woody talked about her struggling students' strengths as, "They may be very social. They thrive by making friends, which is also a great skill." Mr. Sax also described strengths not typically valued academically:

The second one is real good with physical education and gross motor skills. Not so much in fine motor skills but the gross motor skills can be a real strategy when the individual out there is making smart choices. The student is not as limited as in the classroom where he can't speak so much.

Along similar lines, Mr. Montana said, "The other student is very social and very athletic. He tries to do what's right most of the time. Sometimes he just doesn't think before he acts."

Mr. Diggs gave this example of a student who used his artistic strength to figure out a math problem:

He was able to come up with his own strategy of multiplication by putting them in groups. The question was about eggs in a basket so he literally drew the basket. If I would give him that problem like as a calculation problem he wouldn't translate it the same.

Each of the teacher participants gave examples of non academic strengths to the students who struggle academically in school. Most said that these students who struggle are good at art. None of the teachers gave an academic strength, like discipline specific strengths, critical thinking abilities, or study habits for those students who struggle. Other strengths that they gave had to do with physical education or having social skills. They also talked about using these creative skills to help them get these students who struggle academically to do work they do not like to do, like writing.

The Term "Low Students"

The final theme that I was able to find from the one-on-one interviews had to do with the term low students (kids) for the students who struggle in school academically. They all referred to the struggling students as the "low kids." These were the students who were grouped into small groups based on their weaknesses. These teachers constantly used the term "lowest" when referring to students who struggle in school academically. When asked what she meant by "lowest" Mr. Montana stated:

> Lowest meaning on reading levels. They have the lowest reading levels out of all the students. So out of 100 words they are below 50. The others are all in the 80s and 90s, so not just low but far below where the other kids are.

Mrs. Woody said:

> My lower level kids will not get to the research, but I still give them the opportunity to try. I'm pushing them to do more, that more is expected of them and at the same time giving them a challenge. I'm challenging them, everybody. The higher level learners and the lower level students.

> Mrs. Buzz referred to her lower students as, "Lower academically, the kids might be having a difficult time grasping concepts." Mr. Sax did not refer to his students as the lower students but he did say that they are at-risk. According to Valencia (2002), "at risk" claims that the environment the child is in creates the disadvantage for the student. In applying his terminology to his students, Mr. Sax said, "For these type of students that are really at-risk what is effective is really tailoring lessons and looking at the test results and adjusting things accordingly." When asked to give an explanation for at-risk he said:

> At-risk in a lot of ways. At-risk for, we don't hold people back that much anymore, retain them, but they may be at-risk for retention. It could be health things where they are kind

of at-risk if they don't get the health issue taken care of. It could be sight or some sort of dexterity or other issues. They are going to fall through the cracks or they are going to be again outside the norm. They are at-risk of being outside the norm. They are always just a few steps away from getting something, not like a mile from getting something. It's those kids who are way away from getting things that I think are really at-risk for huge failures. You know including eventually dropping out or not continuing on to higher education.

This is what Mrs. West said when referring to her students who struggle academically, "So when I see their strengths, for my low ones, I will try to tailor a lesson around something creative to help teach better what I'm trying to teach them." When referring to his students who struggle academically Mr. Diggs stated, "All of those who are the lowest readers who struggle with sight words are all grouped together. They are all in similar grade levels."

The six teachers who participated in this study also had the same label for the students who struggle academically in their class. Every time that they mentioned a student who struggles academically they referred to these students as "low." Some called them their "low students," others called them their "low group," while another referred to them as "at-risk." Each of these labels meant that these students have trouble learning and that they need to be fixed so that they can succeed.

Conclusion

The six teachers who were interviewed for this qualitative research project gave their views on students who struggle academically and the decisions they made on how to help those students. Their stories provide an understanding of how they use students' strengths and weaknesses to guide teaching strategies, behaviors, and attitudes.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

The previous chapter gives accounts of the experiences of six teachers at my school about how the strengths and weaknesses of students who struggle academically in school affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors. This chapter provides a summary of the theoretical framework that helped to guide this study and framed the findings in Chapter Four. I will also discuss my findings and suggest some areas for possible future research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens that helped to guide this study is Critical Theory. Hargreaves and Margaida (2003) stated that Critical Theory can be used as a framework to interpret issues in education as a basis for a theory of action towards emancipation. The theory guided my focus as I collected the data and analyzed it. I learned that the teachers use weaknesses to group students to help them with those needs. The teachers felt that it was important to get the struggling students to the same level as the other students before they could work on projects that are more challenging. They also blamed parents or the child for students' academic struggles. They

appeared to have the students' best interests at heart even though some comments suggested that students need to be fixed.

Discussion

This qualitative research project started with no hypothesis or expectations about the teaching experiences of the participants. I did not want to make any assumptions or limit any of the themes that would come from the data I collected. The focus of this study was to get the ideas of the participants through their voices and stories. I understood that each of the participants would contribute to the qualitative research project in different ways. Principles like these fit well with my selection of Critical Theory as my guiding theoretical framework. I used the theoretical framework to guide me through data collection, coding, and through the analysis I did as I identified the themes.

The four themes that came from the data analysis were interesting and informative. The themes of small group instruction, factors that contribute to students' academic struggles, strengths of students who struggle, and the term "low students" brought to light how students who struggle in school academically affect the way teachers behave, the strategies they use, and their attitudes toward those students. All of the six teachers talked about helping those struggling students get to grade level. They talked about why they thought students were struggling and the strategies they used to help those students.

Through the four themes that surfaced, I found evidence of the opportunity gap that other critical theorists have defined (Chambers, 2009). Through the interviews I heard many teachers talking about the different opportunities that students get in their classes. The teachers gave examples of the strategies that they used with their students. They gave examples of giving students who were performing at a "higher" level research projects and contracts that allowed the

"higher" students to work ahead and not be slowed down by the "lower" students. During this time teachers worked with the "lower" students in small groups teaching them rote, or basic skills.

The possibility of using Critical Theory in education lies in the emancipatory interest, freeing students from school practices that lead to the social reproduction of power and privilege (Hargreaves & Margarida, 2003). Critical Theory can allow readers of studies such as this to see how some teaching practices continue the cycle of social reproduction. One example is using remedial curriculum in small groups for the "low students." This practice keeps certain students from getting a better education that will lead them to a better life. "It's not very exciting" should not be the accepted description of any students' day-to-day experiences in school. Critical Theory can help all of us in the teaching profession to emancipate certain students from being on the losing end of social reproduction by finding those practices that hold certain students back and replacing those practices with ones that are strength-based and asset-oriented. The intent of Critical Theory is not only to understand the world, but to learn how to change it and ensuring that our teaching practices are strength-based is one way to do this (Hargreaves & Margarida, 2003).

The six teachers in this qualitative research project shared their stories that connected through the four themes that I identified. Together these stories showed how the teachers at this school work to help those students who struggle. The teachers all talked about helping those students who struggle academically using small group instruction strategies. In these small groups they said that they can work with fewer students giving them more quality instruction. In their research Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) found that effective schools use small

group instruction to help their students succeed in school. Small group instruction is an effective strategy, but is only effective when students are being taught critical thinking strategies.

The teachers in my study also mentioned that they use the students' weaknesses to group them and then teach them rote skills, or skills that they should have already learned. Researchers have found that focusing exclusively on basic skills is not helpful for students who are already struggling in school (Lee, 2002). Teachers in more effective schools use higher level questioning strategies in small groups (Taylor et al., 1999). Although I believe these teachers' intentions are in the right place, according to Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole's (1999) research they need to focus on critical thinking skills instead of rote skills in order to give students an opportunity to succeed in life.

Current teaching practices of some teachers prevent students who struggle in school from educational opportunities because they know they are thought of as not capable (Chambers, 2009). According to Mercado (2001), teaching practices limit access from challenging instruction to those students who would benefit the most from it. Dillworth and Brown (2001) also stated the instruction given to low achieving students is usually dry and dull and prepares students for unskilled or semiskilled work. This is how social reproduction is accomplished. Teaching in small groups is productive but the only way to make this type of strategy equal is to hold all students to high expectations. According to Wiggins (1994) small groups should help struggling students by challenging them with higher level material while being supported by the teacher so they can have similar success as their more proficient peers. Equality can only be achieved by establishing high standards for all and by creating an appropriate learning environment (Dillworth & Brown, 2001).

The six teachers also agreed that parents played a role in their children's academic struggles in school. The teachers all believed that students misbehaved in class because they were not taught any better at home. According to Good, Masewicz, and Vogel (2010) parents said that the family chaos was due to the cultural conflicts that their children faced when exchanging one culture for another. Many of the parents of these children come from another country and have a hard time adjusting to the American culture, which values different ideas than what they are used to. This causes a cultural mismatch between parents and students creating tensions between family members (Good et al., 2010). The six teachers that I interviewed also said that students' home lives were unstable causing students to become emotionally unstable at school. Students are not only going through a difficult time in school but also at home where the American values that they are learning at school clash with those that they learn at home. More research needs to be done with students to find out from their perspective why they misbehave in school.

When these six teachers talked about the strengths of the students who struggle academically in their classes they all gave strengths that had to do with art, physical activities, or socialization. They gave examples of how they used art projects to help get those struggling students to do writing assignments. They also talked about how the students who struggle academically are usually very active in class and because of this are usually the best athletes during physical education. Another strength that they gave was that they are very social so have great communication skills that help them to make many friends. Although teachers named these skills as strengths, these are strengths that are not are not typically valued when measuring and communicating student success in school. Gardner's research indicates that there are multiple intelligences which are verbal, logical, visual, musical, kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal,

naturalistic, and existential (as cited in Sener & Cokcaliskan, 2018). Schools do not value these intelligences in the same way. The strengths, or intelligences, that the teachers gave are some of the least valued in our schools.

One other theme that all teachers had in common was use of the term "low students" for students who struggle in school academically. Each of the six teachers talked about their student being "low," in the "low group," or "at risk." These teachers compared students and stated that they had students who were "higher" and some who were "lower" academically. Many also talked about having "higher groups" and "lower groups" when it came to putting students into reading groups. They all mentioned that in the lower groups they worked on foundational skills or lower reading skills to help them get to reading at grade level. They constantly talked about helping the so called "low students" by looking at their needs then tailoring lessons to help them get up to speed. They never gave examples of challenging the so called "low students" with a rich curriculum that would help them learn skills such as research or critical thinking that are needed to further their education. According to Shim (2014) teachers control the teaching strategies that they choose to implement in their classrooms and these decisions will impact whether students go after a higher education.

Educators must look at teaching practices through the lens of Critical Theory to make sure that we are not contributing to the process of reproducing current patterns of power and privilege through teaching practices. Teachers must emancipate students from social reproduction by using a rich curriculum that teaches everyone critical skills that they will need in higher education. Educators must stop limiting some students' academic success by teaching only basic skills, leading to students becoming bored by what they are being taught.

Conclusion

In order for educators to help all students succeed, we need to look at how practices affect the students we teach. A teacher's attitude can negatively affect the way a teacher treats or groups students. The strategies a teacher uses to teach students can also have a negative effect on students. When students are taught rote skills and are excluded from a rich critical curriculum of advanced content and skills that are necessary to motivate student learning and prepare them for life after high school, they get stuck in the same low SES class as their parents. Findings from this qualitative research project can help all educators to understand that some of our strategies are not producing the outcomes we intend them to. Educators must build on students Funds of Knowledge or incorporate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into teaching strategies in order to help educate all students. Educators must also reflect on teaching practices to help us to understand how to change some practices so that we are not causing social reproduction without even knowing it.

References

Ball, D. L., & Bass, H. (1999). Interweaving content and pedagogy in teaching and learning to

    teach: Knowing and using mathematics. In J. Boaler (Ed.), *Multiple Perspectives on*

    Mathematics Teaching and Learning. Westport, CT: Able

Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J., (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and attack on*

    america's public schools. Addison Wesley Publishing Company.

Bradley-Levine, J., &Carr, K.A. (2015). Critical theory and catholic social teaching: A research

    framework for catholic schools. *Journal Of Catholic Education, 18*(2).

Brown-Jeffy, S., & Cooper, J.E. (2011). Toward a conceptual framework of culturally relevant

    pedagogy: An overview of the conceptual and theoretical literature. *Teacher Education*

    Quarterly, 38(1), 65-45.

Burciaga R., (2015). Presuming incompetence from preschool to the professoriate: How

    leadership preparation programs perpetuate or prevent deficit thinking. *Educational*

    Leadership And Administration: Teaching And Program Development, 264-9.

Chambers, T. V. (2009). The "receivement gap": School tracking policies and the fallacy of the

    "achievement gap". *The Journal of Negro Education, 78*(4), 417-431. retrieved from

    http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.summit.csuci.edu/

    docview/222133296?accountid=7284

Critical Theory. (n.d.). In Britannica's online encyclopedia (2015). Retrieved from https://

    www.britannica.com/topic/critical-theory

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Defina, R., & Hannon, L. (2009). Diversity, racial threat and metropolitan housing segregation. *Social Forces, 88*(1), 373-394.

Dilworth, M.E. & Brown, C.E. (2001) Consider the difference: Teaching and learning in culturally rich schools. In V. Richardson (Eds.), *Handbook on research on teaching* (pp. 643-667). Washington, D.C.: American educational research association

Gibson, G. A. (1997). Playing by the rules. In G. Spindler (Eds.) *Education and cultural process: Anthropological approaches* (pp.262-274). Prospect Heights, IL: Wave Land Press.

Good, E. M., Masewicz, S., Vogel, L., (2010). Latino english language learners: Bridging achievement and cultural gaps between schools and families. *Journal Of Latinos And Education, 9*(4), pp. 321-339 Doi: 10.1080/15348431.2010.49104.

Guess R., (1981). The idea of a critical theory. Cambridge: University Press.

Going, M.I., Kahne, J., and McLaughlin, M. W. (2001). School community connections: Strengthening opportunity to learn and opportunity to teach. In V. Richardson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed.), (pp. 998-1028). Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Hargreaves, A., & Margarida, F. (2003). Big change question does critical theory have any practical value for educational change? *Journal of Educational Change, 4*(2), 181-188. doi:http://dx.doi.org.summit.csusi.edu:2048/10.1023/A:1024747409507

Horsford, S. D., and Clark C. (2015) Inclusive leadership and race. In G. Theoharis and M. Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (pp. 58-81). New York: Rutledge.

Kelsey, I., Campuzano, C., and Lopez, F. (2015) Inclusive leadership and english learners. In G.

Theoharis and M. Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (pp. 58-81)
. New York: Rutledge.

Ladsen-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the remix. *Harvard
Educational Review, 84*(1), 74-84, 135. Retrieved from http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/
login?url=http://search-proquest-com.summit:CSUCI.edu/docview//1511014412?
accountid=7284

Lee, J. (2002). Racial and ethnic achievement gap trends: Reversing the progress toward equity?
Educational Researcher, 31(1), 3. Retrieved from http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/login?url
=https://search-proquest-com.summit.csuci.edu/docview/216900768?accountid=7284

Marling, C. D., Marling, A. D., (2015). Inclusive leadership and poverty. In G. Theoharis and M.
Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (pp. 58-81) . New York:
Rutledge.

McDermott, R. P. (1997). Achieving school failure 1972-1997. In G. Spindler (Eds.) *Education
and cultural process: Anthropological approaches* (pp.262-274). Prospect Heights, IL:
Wave Land Press.

Mercado, C.I. (2001). the learner: "Race," "ethnicity," and linguistic difference. In V. Richardson
(Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed.), (pp. 998-1028). Washington, D.C.:
American Educational Research Association.

Milner, H. R. (2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy in a diverse urban classroom. Urban Review:
Issues and Ideas in Public Education, 43(1), 66-89.

Pollack, T. M., (2012). The miseducation of a beginning teacher: One educator's critical
reflections on the functions and power of deficit narratives. *Multicultural
Perspectives, 14*(2), 93-98. doi:10.1080/15210960.2012.673318

Ratcliff, N.J., Carroll, K.L., Jones, C. R., Costner, R.H., Sheehan, H.C., & Hunt, G.H. (2017).

    Behaviors of teacher and their students in schools with and without an achievement gap:

    An observational study. *Teacher Educators' Journal, 10* 118-141.

Ratcliff, N.J., Carroll, K.L., Jones, C. R., Costner, R.H., Sheehan, H.C., & Hunt, G.H. (2016).

    Causes of and solutions to the achievement gap: Teachers' perceptions. *Teacher*

    Educators' Journal, 9 97-111.

Robinson, D., & Lewis, C. W. (2017). Typologies for effectiveness: Characteristics of effective

    teachers in urban learning environments. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, And*

    Research, 13 124-134.

Scanlan M., and Johnson, L. (2015). Inclusive leaders on the social frontier. In G. Theoharis and

    M. Scanlan (Eds.), *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (pp. 58-81) . New York:

    Rutledge.

Sener, S., & Cokçaliskan, A. (2018). An investigation between multiple intelligences and

    learning styles. *Journal Of Education And Training Studies, 6*(2), 125-132.

Serna, G. R., & Woulfe, R. (2017). Social reproduction and college access: Current evidence,

    context, and potential alternatives. *Critical Questions In Education, 8*(1), 1-16.

Sharma, M., (2016). Seeping deficit thinking assumptions maintain the neoliberal

    education agenda: Exploring three conceptual frameworks of deficit thinking in

    inner-city schools. *Education and Urban Society*. Doi: 10.1177/0013124516682301

Shim, J. M., (2014). A bourdieuian analysis: Teachers' beliefs about english language learners'

    academic challenges. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 16*(1), 40-55.

Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Clark, K. F., & Walpole, S. (1999). Effective schools/accomplished

    teachers. *Reading Teacher, 53*(2), 156-159.

Tollefson, K., Magdaleno, K. R. (2016). Educational leaders and the acknowledgment gap.

  Journal of School Leadership, 26(3), 223-248.

Valencia, R. R., Black, M. S., (2002). "Mexican americans don't value education!"-On the

  basis of the myth, mythmaking, and debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education,*

  1(2), pp. 81-103.

Wiener, L. (2006). Challenging deficit thinking. *Educational Leadership, 64*(1), 42-45.

Wiggins, R. A. (1994). Large group lesson/small group follow-up: Flexible grouping. *The*

  Reading Teacher, 47(6), 450. Retrieved from http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/login?url=

  https://search-proquest-com.summit.csuci.edu/docview/203272559?accountid=7284.

Young, E. (2010). Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy:

  How viable is the theory in classroom practice? *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(3),

  248-260.

Appendix A: Site Approval Consent Form

February 15, 2018
Mrs. Pacheco
Principal

201 S Steckel
Santa Paula, Ca. 93060

Dear Mrs. Pacheco,
My name is Alfredo Sanchez. I am a graduate student from California State University Channel Islands writing to you for permission to conduct an action research project at Glen City Elementary school. As you know, I am also a Glen City school teacher. The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers at my school view the strengths and weaknesses of some of our students who struggle academically and how these views affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors with those students.

Process and Confidentiality

The Interview for this action research project consists of approximately five open-ended questions that should take approximately 30-45 minutes to answer. Interviews will take place in a private location, my classroom room 22, or another location, if necessary. During this interview I will be recording responses using an audio recorder. Recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be saved on my encrypted USB drive and will be deleted three years after completion of this action research project. Only my thesis advisor, Dr. Kaia Tollefson, and myself will have access to the transcription of interviews and teacher volunteers will not be asked to state their name or any other details that would point to their identity. Responses will be kept confidential and I will list teacher participants with pseudonyms in my findings.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

For this study, it is expected that minimal risk be experienced. People react differently to stimuli, and it is possible that some might react negatively to the interview questions. If anyone experiences any discomfort, they can terminate the process at any time and have access to Dr. Kaia Tollefson should any issues arise. In addition, if anyone does not wish to answer a question, they may skip it and go to the next question without any negative consequences.

If data collected suggests that teachers views about students who struggle is negative, it follows that teachers will be better able to serve the needs of all students once those negatives are known. This is important because it is the right of all children to learn in school in order to have a better life.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Alfredo Sanchez at (fsanchez@santapaulaunified.org) or at (818-256-6420) and Dr. Kaia Tollefson at (kaia-joan.tollefson@csuci.edu) or at (805-437-3125). For questions or issues regarding your rights as a subject, please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 805-437-8496 or via email at irb@csuci.edu

Sincerely,

Alfredo Sanchez
California State University Channel Islands
(818) 256-6420

___ By checking this line, I agree to allow the action research project to take place at Glen City

___ By checking this line, I do not agree to allow the action research project to take place at Glen City

Signature _____   Date _____

Print name _____

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for Teacher Participants

Dear Glen City teacher,

Thank you in your interest in my action research project. The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers at my school view the strengths and weaknesses of some of our students who struggle academically and how these views affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors with those students.

Process and Confidentiality

The Interview for this action research project consists of approximately five open-ended questions that should take approximately 30-45 minutes to answer. Interviews will take place in a private location, my classroom room 22, or another location, if necessary. During this interview I will be recording your responses using an audio recorder. Recordings and transcriptions of your interview will be saved on my encrypted USB drive and will be deleted three years after completion of this action research project. Only my thesis advisor, Dr. Kaia Tollefson, and myself will have access to the transcription of your interview and you will not be asked to state your name or any other details that would point to your identity. Your responses will be kept confidential and I will list teacher participants with pseudonyms in my findings.

Risks and Benefits of Participation
For this study, it is expected that you may experience minimal risks. People react differently to stimuli, and it is possible that some might react negatively to the interview questions. If you experience any discomfort, you can terminate the process at any time and you have access to Dr. Kaia Tollefson should any issues arise. In addition, if you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go to the next question without any negative consequences.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Alfredo Sanchez at (fsanchez@santapaulaunified.org) or at (818-256-6420) and Dr. Kaia Tollefson at (kaia-joan.tollefson@csuci.edu) or at (805-437-3125). For questions or issues regarding your rights as a subject, please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 805-437-8496 or via email at irb@csuci.edu

Sincerely,

Alfredo Sanchez
Graduate Student
California State University Channel Islands

__ By checking this line, I agree to participate in this interview and give permission for my responses to be recorded.

__ By checking this line, I do not agree to participate in this interview

Signature _____   Date _____

Print name _____

Appendix C: Semi Structured Interview Protocol

Interview: How do teachers at my school view the strengths and weaknesses of some of our students who struggle academically? How do these ideas of strengths and weaknesses affect teaching attitudes strategies, and behaviors?

Hello Glen City teacher participant,

Thank you for you interest in my research project.

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers at my school view the strengths and weaknesses of some of our students who struggle academically and how these views affect teaching attitudes, strategies, and behaviors with those students.

Semi Structured Interview

1. Without giving any names could you describe some of the students who are struggling in your

    class academically. Tell me about those students.

2. As you think about those students what are their strengths?

3. Now again think about those same students and tell me what are some weaknesses?

4. How do these strengths affect your teaching attitude? How do they affect your teaching

strategies? How do they affect your teaching behaviors?

5. How do these weaknesses affect your teaching attitude? How do they affect your teaching

strategies? How do they affect your teaching behaviors?

6. Do you use students strengths or weaknesses to help students achieve in your class? How?

Why or why not?

Appendix D: NIH Completion Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Kaia Tollefson successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 01/26/2018.

Certification Number: 2620068.

at-risk	audible learner	building confidence	building relationships
constant movement around the class	creating positive environment	creative strengths	disconnected
distractions	foundational skills	giving up on students	helping students grow
high achieving students	high achieving students	impulsive	intervention programs
language	learning disability	lowest term for students	multiple step problems
outsider	parents negative	parents positive	project based learning
reading skills	small group instruction	stubborn	students with strong skills
success stories	tailoring lessons	teacher attitudes	teacher behaviors
teacher involvement in students lives	teachers past experiences		