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How Can Teachers Improve? Using Culturally Responsive Frameworks to Examine Adolescent Perspectives

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Abstract

Few qualitative studies have examined student perspectives on teachers' culturally responsive practices (CRP). This study includes focus group data from middle and high school students who shared perspectives on how teachers can improve their classroom practices and examined if reported concepts align with or go beyond existing models of CRP. Black, Latine, or White students (*N*=103) in the Midwest participated in one of 23 focus groups. Pulling from a larger dataset, we identified 103 excerpts where students mentioned ways that their teachers could improve their classroom practices. Two researchers coded each excerpt for alignment with two different models of CRP, the Double Check CARES framework (Hershfeldt et al., 2009) and the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Muñiz, 2020). Thirty-six excerpts did not align with either framework whereas the remaining 67 aligned with one or both frameworks. We discuss common codes, differences and similarities across heterogenous focus groups and those with only students of color or White students. We also present themes that were not aligned with Double Check CARES or the Eight Competencies and discuss implications for incorporating student voice into the conceptualization of CRP and improving classroom practices.

Keywords

Culturally responsive practices; culturally sustaining pedagogy; student voices; focus groups; adolescents

Schools in the United States often operate based on White middle-class norms with White teachers making up 82% of the teaching workforce despite over half of students being students of color (Billingsley et al., 2019; La Salle et al., 2020; NCES, 2023). The racial and cultural mismatch of teachers and students in public schools sparked attention to the need for diversifying the teaching workforce and questions about how to engage students whose values and traditions have historically been excluded from mainstream education (Kunemund et al., 2020; LaSalle et al., 2019; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Even when students of color have teachers from diverse backgrounds, they may still experience mismatches between school culture and home culture given the White middle-class norms

of most schools (La Salle et al., 2020; Markus, 2008). Attempts to bridge the gap between students' home and school culture by improving teachers' culturally responsive practices (CRPs; Bradshaw et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2017; Milner, 2017; Skiba et al., 2014) have birthed several labels and frameworks to stress the importance of foregrounding students' culture and identity (Mensah, 2021). Seminal works of key figures in educational research such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a), Geneva Gay (2018), and Django Paris (2012) have provided philosophical and practical blueprints to create foundational knowledge of race, culture, equity, and the school success of racially minoritized students. Additional frameworks such as the Double Check CARES framework (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Hershfeldt, 2009) and the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Muñiz, 2019) combine elements from different models of CRP. Despite the increased attention to teachers' use of CRPs, few studies have examined how students perceive CRPs and what recommendations they might have to improve teachers' practices. In this study, we sought to amplify the voices of middle and high school students as they provided feedback for teachers.

Overview of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings were trailblazers in bringing CRP into education, and Django Paris' more recent work is considered a "re-mix" of Ladson-Billings' work (Ladson Billings, 2014). Table 1 highlights the components of each model of CRP.

In her book, *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (2009) sought to challenge deficit views about African American students by affirming the need for them to accept their cultural and ethnic identities while also critiquing the inequities prevalent in schools. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to incorporate culture into educationc and bring real-world issues into the classroom during instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). In contrast, Gay's (2010) framework focused on praxis or the *doing* of teaching. She highlighted the need to ensure higher degrees of school success for racially and ethnically minoritized students by providing them with opportunities to critically examine the equities in their own experiences (Gay, 2010). Gay also makes specific recommendations for teachers such as building on students' existing knowledge, scaffolding, and identifying students' task orientations and how they learn best to guide instructional practices (Gay, 2018).

Paris (2012) asserted that cultural and linguistic dexterity and plurality are necessary to maintain multiculturalism and multilingualism in research and teacher practice. He developed culturally sustaining pedagogy as a way for educators to help students develop positive cultural identities while also excelling in core academic subjects. Paris (2021) contends that culturally sustaining pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy (1995a) both center asset-based pedagogical approaches by dismantling pervasive deficit views that are ingrained in the education of minoritized youths. This holds true for culturally responsive teaching as well. Notably, Ladson-Billings developed culturally responsive pedagogy with a focus on African American students, but culturally sustaining pedagogies expands to consider multiple intersectional identities and the impact of media and other constructs on youth development (Ladon-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Frameworks of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Building off the seminal work of Ladson-Billings and Gay as well as more recent literature on asset-based pedagogies, frameworks have been offered that describe specific components of culturally responsiveness (Rychly & Graves, 2012). In this study, we chose to examine the Double Check CARES framework (Hershfeldt et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2018) given that our research team implements teacher professional development programming based on this model. We have also developed a growing interest in Muñiz's (2019), "Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching,[1]" framework since it has more recently drawn on the extant literature to comprehensively identify competencies that are necessary for culturally responsive teachers. The Eight Competencies framework illustrates the skills and knowledge that are critical to implementing culturally responsive teaching. The competencies are described in Table 2. Considerable uptake of this framework is evident in the increased inclusion of CRP in state standards across the US (Muñiz, 2020).

The Double Check CARES framework was designed to include instruction and classroom management practices by focusing on the following five principles: *Connection to the curriculum*, *Authentic relationships*, *Reflective thinking*, *Effective communication*, and *Sensitivity to students' cultures* as the key components in cultural responsiveness (Hershfeldt et al., 2009). The Double Check CARES framework was developed to create systemic changes in the school environment while also increasing teachers' use of culturally responsive practices as a part of a teacher professional development program to address the disproportionate disciplining of racially and ethnically minoritized students in the form of suspensions, expulsions, and office disciplinary referrals. The Double Check teacher coaching and professional development program integrates classroom management and culturally responsive pedagogy by providing teachers with opportunities for professional development and individual coaching in the classroom (Bradshaw et al., 2018). We describe and compare the five components/principles of Double Check CARES to Muniz's framework in Table 2. The similar components of each framework are positioned next to each other and the components of Muñiz's framework that do not align with the Double Check CARES framework are at the bottom of the table.

Muñiz's framework has similar components to Double Check CARES and some additions such as recognizing and redressing bias. This new framework has not been empirically evaluated yet but shows promise in the way that it incorporates aspects of culturally responsive teaching and culturally responsive practice into one model. Experimental research using a teacher-level randomized controlled trial supports the Double Check CARES framework (Bradshaw et al., 2018). The efficacy study of Double Check showed the impact of ongoing professional development and coaching on teachers' use of CRPs including improvements in teachers' anticipation and response to students' needs as well as fewer disciplinary actions by coached teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2018).

In comparing and contrasting the two frameworks, the Muñiz framework includes recognizing and redressing bias, modeling high expectations, and collaborating with families

[1]For brevity, we refer to this framework interchangeably as the Eight Competencies framework and the Muñiz framework.

and communities which are distinct from the Double Check CARES framework. The Muñiz framework considers collaboration with families and community but does not directly address authentic relationships in the context of students and teachers which is a cornerstone of the Double Check CARES approach. Despite these differences, both frameworks seek to identify specific components of teacher CRP that can be bolstered to support students' classroom experiences.

Student Voice on Cultural Responsiveness

Despite frameworks like the Eight Competencies and Double Check CARES to guide cultural responsiveness in schools and ongoing advocacy for incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into schools (American Teacher Unions: AFT, 2020), student voices have not been centered in the conversation. Though critics argue that including student voices in improving school reform can shift power and undermine teachers' authority and knowledge, there is a need to include student voices in the narrative about cultural responsiveness (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Deeming student voices and perspectives as unimportant or "silly" prevents teachers from modifying their practice to be more inclusive (Braggs, 2007).

Research suggests that fostering student voices in the creation of culturally responsive classrooms entails encouraging students to "identify and analyze issues related to their schools and their learning that they see as significant" (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p. 4) and feel empowered to "speak and act alongside credentialed educators as critics and creators of educational practice" (Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 17). Evidence suggests that including student voices helps to bridge the home and school culture can result in more engaged (Cody & McGarry, 2012; Kim & Searle, 2017; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015), empowered (Cody & McGarry, 2012; Kim & Searle, 2017), and valued learners (Reynolds, 2018; Wilder, 2015). For example, Berryman et al. (2017) assert:

> By sharing power with students, by listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers and policy makers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces hope can emerge (Freire, 1994; p. 491).

Students' perspectives on CRPs are understudied, but quantitative studies have found positive associations between students' perceptions of CRPs, academic outcomes, and ethnic-racial identity development (Byrd, 2016) as well as higher academic engagement, greater perceived culture of equity, and more positive attitudes towards teachers (Bottiani et al., 2020). In qualitative interviews with 17 African American students about CRPs, Howard (2001) found that students demonstrated a desire for positive relationships with teachers who promote a strong classroom community and make learning fun. Another study with five African American students found that participating in a culturally responsive math intervention improved their attitudes toward math (Hubert, 2014). The students also discussed themes related to CRP such as their classrooms feeling "home-like" and their teachers being caring (Hubert, 2014). Another study specific to chorus students in Puerto Rico found that students saw their teachers engaging in CRPs as honoring their own cultures while also expanding and teaching them about new cultures (Shaw, 2016). Students also

acknowledged the challenges that teachers might experience with honoring many different diverse cultural groups in one class and with limited time (Shaw, 2016). Building on past studies that have incorporated student voices into the conversation on CRPs, we sought to expand the literature base by sharing the perspectives of a larger and more diverse sample of middle and high school general education students.

The Current Study

Despite the importance of including students' voices in the study of CRPs, few studies have taken this approach (Howard, 2001; Hubert, 2014; Shaw, 2016). In the context of a larger project on teachers' use of CRPs, the current study examined adolescent middle and high school students' perspectives on the ways in which teachers can improve their practices. Students participated in focus groups at school consisting of White, Black, and Latine students. For this study, we were interested in how students wanted to see their teachers improve and how those recommendations might align with or go beyond existing models of CRP, the Eight Competencies (Muñiz, 2019) and the Double Check CARES frameworks (Bradshaw et al., 2018). We were specifically interested in these frameworks given the comprehensiveness and recent development of the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching framework (Muñiz, 2019) and our ongoing use of the Double Check CARES framework for research purposes. These frameworks are among the most widely used CRP frameworks warranting further examination from the student perspective.

METHOD

This study is part of a larger collection of projects examining CRPs, where mixed-method data are being collected from students, teachers, and parents. The current study used focus group interviews (FGIs) as a form of data collection, rooted in a blended paradigm, between pragmatist and constructivist philosophies (Savin-Baden et al., 2013). Pragmatically, our FGI protocol was guided by the literature on CRPs and focused on the broad domains of trust, culture, comfort, and respect (Bottiani et al., 2012), given the lack of consensus on the definition of CRPs in education (Bottiani et al., 2018). However, we coded for Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching components during data analysis. We conducted 23 FGIs with middle and high school students. Each group included between 4–6 students and each group had students from different grade levels, depending on if students were in middle or high school. Most FGIs were composed of racially/ethnically homogenous groups of students. Each FGI began by reminding students of the purpose of the study and our responsibility to keep their statements confidential. Using the 'questioning route' during focus group discussion (Krueger, 2014), we asked questions in a conversational style.

The constructivist lens allowed us to analyze and interpret the data. Because FGIs assist in gathering information about common experiences from the participants, our analytical approach enabled us to construct themes surrounding groups' respective experience with teachers' practices.

Procedure

From fall 2018 to fall 2019, the research team visited general education classrooms to introduce the study to students and invite them to participate in FGIs. In the presentation, students learned how they would help the research team better understand teachers' practices that create a welcoming classroom environment. Parent consent and student assent forms were left in the classroom for students to pick up if interested. After the research team received consent and assent, we collaborated with the school principals and teachers to schedule FGIs. Staff at participating schools were not provided any training on CRPs, but the educators were attuned to the language of culturally responsiveness due to a district-wide commitment to CRPs (i.e., Aguayo et al., in press). Additionally, while the schools were composed of predominantly White students, the research team intentionally recruited a diverse pool of students until saturation of data was achieved.

The FGIs were conducted by a research coordinator and doctoral students who were trained and supervised by the lead Principal Investigator. We intentionally recruited diverse FGI moderators from a doctoral program to match students' race/ethnicity based on the demographic information shared on the student assent form. Moderators had completed coursework in qualitative research. All FGIs were conducted in English.

Each student received a $10 gift card and pizza for their participation. FGIs ranged from 60–90 minutes. Each FGI was recorded using an audio recorder and the interview recordings were transcribed by a transcription company. Dedoose was used as the analytical software to create codes for the first stage of analysis (Dedoose, 2021).

Study Participants & School Contexts

Students in this study were recruited from two school districts in the central Midwest region of the US. One district served 18,000 students and employed approximately 1,300 teachers. The second district had an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students and employed nearly 700 teachers. The demographics were similar for students in both districts with the majority (district 1: 56%; district 2: 61%) of the student body identifying as White and the remaining demographics as follows: 20–21% Black, 7% Latine, 2–5% Asian, and 10% two or more races. Fifty percent of students in both districts qualified for free and/or reduced-price lunch. We do not know the specific racial makeup of the teachers but these school districts are situated in towns where the White population is almost 80% suggesting that the teacher workforce is likely predominantly White consistent with the teaching workforce nationally.

A total of 103 students participated in the FGIs. After collecting parent consent and student assent, the research team selected students who self-identified as either Black, Latine, or White.[2] Students' self-reported demographic information including grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender are described in Table 3. Students' ages ranged from 11 to 18 years old. Eleven FGIs were conducted with middle school students (32 sixth graders, 8 seventh graders, 3 eighth graders), and 12 FGIs were conducted with high school students (22

[2]In the original study, homogenous groups (i.e., Black, Latine, White) were considered during data collection due to the differentiated experience between Black, Latine, and White (e.g., Williams & Deutsch, 2016). However, we encountered the reality that multiracial students self-selected to be part of the FGIs with Black students.

ninth graders, 15 tenth graders, 16 eleventh graders, 7 twelfth graders). Sixteen of the FGIs included racially/ethnically homogenous groups (5 Black FGIs; 4 Latine FGIs; 7 White FGIs); seven of the FGIs included racially/ethnically heterogenous groups (in these FGIs, students indicated differing racial identities).

Focus Group Protocol

The first question of the FGI asked students to, "Tell us about the teacher you liked the most and why did you like them," which was meant to ease the participants into the interview. Subsequent questions moved from general to specific and focused on the aspects of CRP relevant to both the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies frameworks. Participants were asked to share their experiences with PK-12 teachers and what teachers did to make them feel (a) welcomed, (b) respected, (c) trust in their teacher, and (d) treated differently based on identity differences. Finally, students were asked for (e) recommendations for teachers to improve. Example questions include: "What could teachers do to show that they understand what you need and are respectful of the identities you bring to the classroom (i.e., racial or ethnic/cultural background)?" and "What suggestions do you have for teachers to improve how they interact with students from diverse backgrounds (i.e., racial, language or cultural background)?"

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Charmaz's (2014) blended pragmatic, constructivist framing. The full data analysis process is described in Aguayo and colleagues (in press). The first phase of data analysis included open coding using Dedoose to identify themes and ideas in the data. The codes were then applied to the data using a constant comparison process, which ultimately resulted in 20 codes. In phase two of the data analysis process, the research team read through each excerpt that had been applied a code, created memos, engaged in consensus meetings to finalize codes, and ultimately determined the four overarching themes that captured the codes. For this study, we specifically examined the "To Improve Teachers" code, which captured students' perspectives on what they thought would be helpful for their teachers to know to improve their practice. We were particularly interested in identifying how these recommendations for teachers would map onto the literature related to CRPs and how or if the recommendations would vary between students of color and White students. We created multiple data sets: one that included all of the "To Improve Teachers" excerpts for the focus groups with students of color, one that included all of the excerpts from the focus groups with White students, and one from the racially heterogeneous focus groups. Next, we used both the Double Check CARES framework (Author, 2018; Hershfeldt et al., 2009) and the Eight Competencies framework (Muñiz, 2020) to code each excerpt. The codes can be viewed in Table 4. If an excerpt did not align with Double Check CARES or the Eight Competencies, it was coded as "no code." For example, an excerpt could be coded as "Authentic Relationships" for Double Check CARES and then receive "no code" for the Eight Competencies, or an excerpt could be coded as "Effective Communication" for Double Check CARES and "Competency 8: Communicate in Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Ways" for the Eight Competencies.

The first and second authors as well as a trained undergraduate research assistant coded the data for this study. The first author and the undergraduate research assistant independently coded each excerpt to apply the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies codes and then came together to discuss discrepancies or excerpts that were challenging to categorize. Any codes that they could not agree on were then discussed with the third author and the last author until a consensus was reached. After all relevant excerpts had been applied either a Double Check CARES or Eight Competencies code, we turned our attention to the excerpts that were not related to components of CRPs identified within those existing frameworks (i.e., “no code” excerpts). Again, the first author and a second coder (either the research assistant or second author) worked independently with the datasets for excerpts from the three different types of focus groups. For each dataset, we examined the uncoded Double Check CARES excerpts and uncoded Eight Competencies excerpts separately. The first author and a second coder reviewed each dataset and identified new codes and themes, where relevant, across excerpts that were not applied a Double Check CARES or Eight Competencies code. The first author and the undergraduate research assistant coded the excerpts for White students, and the first author and second author coded the excerpts from the FGIs with students of color and racially heterogenous students. The two coders examined the datasets independently, identified themes, communicated about similarities and differences in the coding, and then discussed disagreements and came to an agreement with the third and last authors. In the results, we report frequencies on the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies codes as well as details on the themes identified in the excerpts that fell outside of the existing frameworks. We also look across datasets to identify themes and similarities between the focus groups with students of color and the White students and the students in the heterogeneous focus groups.

Positionality

Given the way that our own experiences and identities impact the way that we conduct research, positionality statements are provided for authors one through three and the last author who were involved with the data analysis process. The first author is a Black woman, researcher, psychologist, and former elementary school teacher. Her approach to the research process is informed by her own experiences as a member of a marginalized group and as a classroom teacher in an under-resourced school. The second author is male and a Latine immigrant. He is committed to co-creating educational spaces and policy changes with racially/ethnically minoritized students and their families. The third author is an Asian female with expertise in qualitative research and teacher professional development to improve their equity-mindedness. The last author is a Black female with expertise in qualitative research methodologies and culturally responsive practices. All authors are involved in ongoing research related to the Double Check CARES model and were interested in how student voice could change how the Double Check CARES domains are defined and operationalized in schools. In addition, we wondered if there might be aspects of CRP not fully captured by Double Check CARES.

Results

A total of 103 excerpts from 21 out of the 23 focus groups in the full dataset were applied to the "To Improve Teachers" code during the initial data analysis process (Aguayo et al., in press). A majority of the excerpts came from FGIs with students of color (n = 63, 61%); one-third (n=34) of the excerpts came from FGIs with White students, and the remaining six (6%) excerpts were from heterogeneous focus groups. Table 4 provides frequencies for how each excerpt was coded based on the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching frameworks. Note that in some instances, one excerpt was applied more than one code from a specific framework. For example, an excerpt could be coded with both Authentic Relationships and Effective Communication using the Double Check CARES framework. Moreover, the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies codes were not mutually exclusive during data analysis. An excerpt could be aligned with Double Check *CARES Authentic Relationships* and *Competency 6: Promote Respect for Students Differences*. Note that we describe the overlap when presenting the Eight Competencies findings, but do not revisit overlap in the CARES findings section so as not to be redundant.

Focus Group Findings

Despite the focus group protocol being based on principles of CRP, much of what students thought teachers could improve upon (i.e., excerpts that were coded "To Improve Teachers") fell outside of the realm of both the Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies frameworks and was uncoded. When coding using the Eight Competencies framework, 65% and 75% of excerpts went uncoded for students of color and White students, respectively. Only one of the six excerpts from the heterogeneous FGIs was applied an Eight Competencies code. Whereas more of the excerpts aligned with the CARES framework, about 37% of excerpts were still left uncoded for students of color, 44% for White students, and 50% (n= 3) for students in the heterogeneous FGIs.

Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching: Findings for White Students: There were a total of 34 excerpts from FGIs with White students, but only 29% (n =10) of them aligned with the Eight Competencies framework. Many of these excerpts also aligned with an aspect of Double Check CARES. For example, one student commented:

> I feel like if you want to become a teacher, you shouldn't… if you're going to be racist toward someone or be discriminatory toward someone, teaching's not the judge for you, especially with a school like [ours] when there's multiple cultures of people and people come from all over the country and the world. You shouldn't be a teacher if you think that's okay.

This quote aligned with *Competency 1: Reflect on One's Cultural Lens* and Double Check *CARES Reflective Thinking*. In the same focus group, a comment was made that:

> One of my teachers, like in the civics block, if we all do pretty poorly, they just assume we didn't study. And they're just like, "Why didn't you study," and I wish they would be, "It's okay, you'll do better next time," or something. And I know

> maybe that's kind of childish, but it's just having the aspect of teachers believing in you helps.

This statement aligned with *Competency 5 Model High Expectations for All Students* and Double Check *CARES Effective Communication*.

In another group, students made statements aligning with ***Competency 6***: *Promote Respect for Students Differences*:

> I'm Catholic. Some people don't agree with that, which is fine. But also having a teacher who's very accepting of it. They don't have to understand or fully accept things, but, they're very nice about it and very open to it. Stuff like that.

This quote was also coded as Double Check *CARES Sensitivity to Students' Cultures*.

Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching: Findings for Students of Color: In contrast, 35% (22 out of 63 excerpts) from FGIs with students of color aligned with the Eight Competencies framework. Notably, there were 14 (22%) excerpts from the focus groups with students of color related to *Competency 6: Promote Respect for Students Differences* and this competency was mentioned less frequently by White students (n= 4; 12%). Students made comments about teachers needing to stop stereotyping them and to start appreciating diversity such as, "Don't go back to the past how we used to be. Where diversity was a bad thing, look towards the future into the better world in school." Students of color (n= 5) also wanted their teachers to educate themselves on other cultures and to be reflective (*Competency 1: Reflect on One's Cultural Lens*), "I feel like teachers need to realize, especially White teachers, need to realize they've got privileges, and we know this, when you guys say stuff that is passive aggressive, or like undertone racism." A couple of students made statements about wanting their teachers to believe in them that aligned with *Competency 5: Model High Expectations for All Students* such as, "Teachers should think you can change," and, "Or like when a teacher tell you to have courage and stop doubting yourself." No students discussed issues related to *Competency 2: Recognizing and Redressing Bias in the System*, *Competency 4: Bringing Real-world Issues into the Classroom*, or *Competency 7: Collaborating with Families and the Local Community*.

Eight Competencies Findings from Heterogeneous FGIs: Only one of the six excerpts from the heterogeneous FGIs corresponded with a component of the Eight Competencies framework. The participant talked about ensuring representations of cultural diversity in the classroom stating, "I'd say if a teacher had more cultural posters in their classroom that could also help…it could be religions, skin color, anything like that," aligning with *Competency 3 Draw on students' culture to share curriculum and instruction*.

Double Check CARES Findings for White Students: Double Check CARES codes were applied to 55% (19 out of 34) excerpts about teacher improvement from FGIs with White students. *Authentic Relationships* was most common (n = 13) with one student stating:

> My Spanish teacher is a great example of this. [They're] really laid back and [will] talk to all of us, and communicating with us, and asking us how our weekend was,

> and telling us things. Just interacting with us, and communicating, I think also helps with people being comfortable in that situation. Instead of just jumping right into whatever learning you're doing."

Another student commented: Whenever a teacher asks individuals specifically, "How are you?" And wants to actually know things about you and how you're doing in the class, it is really helpful for individual students who might not want to come forward and be like, "I'm struggling with this specific thing. There were also comments related to teachers engaging in *Reflective Thinking* practices. One student said, "I would say a key thing is just be understanding, put yourself in that student's shoes on experience what they're experiencing." Other students made comments aligned with *Reflective Thinking* about teachers not making assumptions or being quick to judge students.

Students also had recommendations for how their teachers could improve communication. A student from one of the focus groups with White students stated, "I know that some teachers, whenever you don't know something, they're like, 'You should know this,' but I feel a lot better if they didn't assume that we knew everything." In this example, the student wanted their teacher to respond in a more supportive and strengths-based manner.

Lastly, students also talked about the importance of teachers creating a comfortable classroom environment and demonstration *Sensitivity to Students' Cultures*:

> Some people might feel uncomfortable with that, but if I was trying to hide an identity thing, I want to just talk about it. Like my block class, we'll talk about different things and identities in that class. You look around and you soon realize my class is okay with this. They're not biased and they're not gonna bully you for things like that. So, I think knowing too that it's a safe environment to talk about stuff or who you are.

Double Check CARES Findings for Students of Color: The students of color referenced all components of the Double Check CARES framework except *Connection to Curriculum*. *Authentic Relationships* was a common code for the teacher recommendations with one student stating:

> Like when they try to form relationships with their students. It's not always let's just come to class, do the work, and get out. But then they can also talk to you and then you can also have like… say you're having a bad day; you can still talk to that teacher because they're going to understand and stuff.

Several recommendations were made related to *Reflective Thinking* such as, "I think they just need to educate their selves on those cultures because they're ignorant on the cultures. All they know is just what they think they know. It's just like the stereotypes." Students of color wanted their teachers to have more *Effective Communication* when discussing discipline issues or more sensitive topics like if they are having a bad day:

> If we in a bad mood, or if they feel like we disrespected another student, instead of just wanting to write us up and being so quick with it, they could take us to the hallway and have a little chat with us. I know some teachers that do that.

In general, students wanted their teachers to know that there were ways that they could facilitate better communication depending on the situation.

Sensitivity to Students' Cultures was another common area for recommendations. Comments were made about teachers needing to be more open to "see diversity as a good and not a bad thing," and stop profiling students:

> If they educate themselves on the culture of African American cultures, Spanish cultures, I think it would help them more so they cannot stereotype. If they educated themselves on the culture of durags, you would know that durags have been a fashion thing for I don't know how long.

Double Check CARES Findings from Heterogeneous FGIs: Three out of the six excerpts from the heterogeneous FGIs were applied Double Check CARES codes. The excerpts aligned with *Connection to the Curriculum*, *Authentic Relationships, and Effective Communication*. Students requested that teachers communicate more effectively with them, "They probably would be not yelling at us for everything we might do wrong like" and that teachers should build stronger relationships with students, "I feel like teachers should try to tell kids if there's someone who can talk to them and communicate with them, so we can know them more possibly. Make them feel like they're at home. And then possibly make friends with them."

Other Themes

When examining the uncoded excerpts, there were 36 that were not applied a Double Check CARES or Eight Competencies code. We also looked for trends when only a Double Check CARES or Eight Competencies code was applied. Although the excerpts were initially coded based on the racial demographics of the FGI, there were no notable differences; therefore, we discuss the overall themes. It was common for an excerpt to receive a Double Check *CARES Authentic Relationships* (n = 24) code or *Effective Communication* (n =13) code, but no Eight Competencies code. Less commonly, an excerpt aligned with one of the Eight Competencies and no component of Double Check CARES. This was only the case for four excerpts, one of which aligned with *Competency 5* and three of which aligned with *Competency 6*.

For the excerpts that received neither a Double Check CARES nor Eight Competencies code, a theme emerged related to teachers' classroom practices and differentiated instruction (n=13). Students had thoughts about how their teachers should ensure that they understand what is being taught in the classroom. For example, one student discussed student understanding and differential learning needs:

> I think that if a student doesn't understand something, it's a lot easier if the teacher doesn't just go over it in the same way but tries a different approach because often times math teachers are like, 'This is how you do it, and I can't teach you another way.

Another student commented on the same topic: "When the teacher tell you what to do, but they really don't explain what to do. They're like, 'Just do this,' but they don't tell me how

to do it, so I'm like, 'Man, I'm confused.'" One student also commented on how individuals with personal needs might require addition support in the classroom: "If there's a troubled student, the teachers have to know that they may have to go deeper into what they're saying and explain it more instead of explaining the same thing multiple times. They might have to break it into pieces for that one kid to understand." Overall, students had a lot to say about how teachers could ensure that they understood classroom content and these statements fell outside of the existing components of the Eight Competencies and Double Check CARES frameworks.

Students also made comments that were low in frequency but highlighted other important aspects of the classroom experience. Students discussed topics related to interpersonal interactions with teachers. A few White students wanted teachers to provide praise and positive reinforcement (e.g., "I'm a strong believer in positive reinforcement. If you do well on something, whenever you've been consistently average, it helps people to want to strive to do well again. Give them words of encouragement and say 'good job;'" $n = 3$). Some students of color also mentioned sometimes not trusting teachers and being worried about sharing information with them (e.g., "It's like being afraid that whatever you tell someone is going to be put out there;" $n = 2$). They also wanted teachers to understand that students have things going on outside of the classroom (e.g., "They need to understand people…We're going to get like six hours of sleep. We get out of school at 3:40, and then we've got seven classes: $n = 2$). Lastly, there were a couple of comments about the hierarchy between teachers and students suggesting that some teachers had made students feel like they were beneath them (e.g., "Like when the teacher feels like you're lesser than them; $n = 2$).

DISCUSSION

This study sought to promote student voice by presenting the perspectives of middle and high school students in the Midwest on what teachers need to know to best support them in the classroom. We conducted FGIs with 103 students across 23 focus groups examining students' perspectives on teachers' use of CRPs. As such, we expected that students would speak about topics that they thought their teachers should know in relation to CRPs as well as other practices that felt important to them. Broader findings can be found in Aguayo and colleagues (in press); here, we specifically examined the code "Teachers need to know" which emerged during the qualitative data analysis. We separately analyzed excerpts from FGIs with White students, students of color, and heterogeneous groups in relationship to specific models of CRP, the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Muñiz, 2019), and the Double Check CARES framework (Bradshaw et al., 2018).

Although we did include excerpts from heterogeneous focus groups, most of our discussion focuses on differences and similarities between the FGIs with White students and those with students of color. It is notable that there were significantly fewer discussions about how teachers could improve in the heterogeneous FGIs. Specifically, there were seven FGIs with White students and 34 relevant excerpts, 11 FGIs with students of color and 63 relevant excerpts, but only six excerpts total from the five heterogeneous FGIs with White students and students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. It may be that students were more

open to sharing their ideas in the racially homogenous FGIs. Given the small sample size of excerpts from the heterogeneous groups, we hesitate to draw any conclusions, and instead focus on the White students and students of color in the remaining discussion.

In examining the excerpts that aligned with the Eight Competencies, three components (i.e., *Competency 2: Recognize and Redress Bias in the System, Competency 4: Bring Real-world Issues into the Classroom and Competency 7: Collaborate with Families and the Local Community*) were not mentioned in any of the FGIs. Since students were not explicitly asked about these concepts, it is unclear if these topics are not top of mind for students or if they just did not speak to them since they were not specifically asked about them. Given that these three components relate to issues traditionally outside of the school or classroom environment (i.e., school system, local community), students may not readily see their relevance to the cultural responsiveness of their teachers. The remaining components of the Eight Competencies framework were coded with relatively low frequencies, but there were differences between White students and students of color. Students of color more often discussed *Competency 6: Promote Respect for Students Differences*. This could be due to the cultural connotation that giving respect carries within some racial/ethnic groups (Calzada et al., 2010; Dixon et al., 2008). It is also likely that in comparison to their White counterparts, students of color experience more disrespect at school in the form of racial microaggressions (Allen, 2010; Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017; Jones & Galliher, 2015), disproportionate and subjective application of exclusionary discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2022), and less overt disrespectful practices, such as low expectations (Cherng, 2017; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). On the other hand, no students of color mentioned *Connection to the Curriculum*. Given that making connections to the curriculum and bringing real world issues into the classroom are often touted as common and effective ways that teachers can be more culturally responsive (Gay, 2018; Hershfeldt et al., 2009), it is surprising that students of color did not mention it. In contrast, all students had a great deal to say about *Authentic Relationships, Effective Communication*, and *Reflective Thinking*. It is interesting that the Double Check CARES components that seem most related to culture, *Connection to the Curriculum* and *Sensitivity to Students' Cultures*, were discussed the least by students. Might this suggest that from a student perspective the irrelevance of teachers bringing culture into the classroom in the absence of authentic relationships, effective communication, and teachers who are engaging in critical self-reflection? As such, we wonder if authentic relationships are a component, a byproduct, or precursor to culturally responsive practice, or all of the above.

It was most notable to us that although our FGI interview was guided by the literature on CRP, many of the excerpts were not aligned with Double Check CARES or the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Students mentioned several other important things that they wanted their teachers to consider. Students of color and White students similarly made statements about teachers' instructional practices requesting that teachers make sure that students understand what they are being taught and that teachers individualize instruction or explain concepts in a different way when needed. Students' recommendations aligned with commonly used good instructional practices such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding. Students wanted teachers to be willing to alter their instructional practices to meet their individual needs, particularly when they were

struggling to understand a learning concept. Interestingly, these requests from students related to sensitivity to students' learning needs but not cultural sensitivity which is front and center in Double Check CARES and the Eight Competencies frameworks. The repeated mention of these instructional practices was interesting to us given that it is not an identified component of either the Double Check CARES or Eight Competencies frameworks. As such, effective teaching practices are foundational components of teachers' practices that must be fulfilled in order to truly be culturally responsive. Indeed, Ladson-Billings (1995b) proposed that being culturally responsive is more than just good teaching, and findings from the current study align with that notion suggesting that students desire good teaching practices that also take into consideration the individualized needs of students. This is also consistent Debnam and colleagues' (2023), find that teachers' behaviors such as building strong relationships, tailoring communication, and discussing culture in class were identified by teachers as straddling the line between good teaching and CRP. Students' focus on teachers' instructional practices is an important reminder that sound teaching methods must be cross-cutting in every element of CRP. This finding is further supported by Gaias and colleagues (2019) who found that teachers who were able to anticipate and respond to students' individual needs and elicit students' participation in classroom activities also demonstrated the highest use of culturally responsive practices.

Limitations

Our study has many strengths including the large number of focus groups that were conducted with a diverse group of students and the data gleaned that will expand the small literature base exploring students' voices and CRPs. Despite these strengths, this study is not without limitations. We acknowledge that school experiences are nuanced and that we are not able to speak to the experiences of students of different minoritized groups when analyzing the data at the focus group level based on racial composition (White, students of color, and those in heterogenous groups. Given that many racially minoritized groups have historically experienced marginalization in schools and that the majority of students in both partner school districts were White, we felt that this was the best approach to analyzing this specific dataset. Further, the voices of students of color (Black, Latine, etc) may be limited in generalizability given that the sample was drawn from schools that are predominantly White. In the future, a similar study in a school where racial and ethnic students are in the majority may provide important information on differing experiences of students based on the racial demographics and cultural context of their school.

Although we did not explicitly ask about each of the eight competencies or Double Check CARES domains, the interview protocol may have inadvertently prompted more comments about some domains over others. However, this study still offers important insights into what students think their teachers need to know with some of these themes aligning with Double Check CARES and Eight Competencies and others going beyond existing frameworks of culturally responsive teaching practices. Our approach is supported by the similarities between the frameworks and the fact that there were excerpts that applied to codes in both frameworks. We specifically used the Eight Competencies framework because it was developed based on multiple asset-based pedagogies and future studies using this as a theoretical model can provide further insight into students' perspectives on CRPs.

Lastly, given the small number of themes that fell outside of the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Double Check CARES frameworks, we are unable to draw any definitive conclusions about students' perspectives on CRPs beyond the existing frameworks. However, it appears that further research is needed regarding student perspectives on teacher practices and that there may be opportunities to expand frameworks of CRPs, broaden the definitions of existing components, or further contextualize the importance of sound instructional practices within each of the frameworks.

Implications and Future Directions

Our research inviting student voices into the conversation on CRPs demonstrates that middle and high schoolers can identify and describe discrete and malleable aspects of the classroom environment that can be changed to improve the cultural context of learning. First, our findings have implications for strengthening theories of culturally responsive teaching. Given the large number of student comments fell outside the scope of two dominant theories of CRP, our findings may help guide refinements of these theories for future study. The student focus on effective instructional practices when discussing teacher improvement suggests the integral nature of instruction in students' views of CRPs. Although the two guiding theories used in the present study do not include instructional practices as core components of CRPs, this is likely because the goal of these theories is to highlight the unique features of CRPs. Both theories assume that in addition to the CRPs they highlight, universal aspects of effective teaching are also in place. This includes instructional and classroom organization and management. The current findings suggest it may be helpful for these and other theories to be more explicit about the intersection of good teaching with their core components of CRPs.

The elements of CRP brought forth by adolescents can also be used to shape or recalibrate existing observation and survey measures of culturally responsive practices that can be used in research and practice when giving teachers feedback. While teachers continue to receive training on and are encouraged to engage in CRPs, the student perspectives in our study highlight the importance of teachers focusing just as much on good teaching as on incorporating culture into the classroom. Teachers must be reminded that cultural responsiveness is not just bringing students' culture into the classroom and building authentic relationships but using these important elements of CRP in the context of other effective teaching strategies (Debnam et al., 2023). In addition, students can provide important feedback to be incorporated into teacher professional development programs and coaching programs such as Double Check that are designed to increase teacher CRPs (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Hershfeldt, 2009). Further, empowering students by giving voice to their classroom experiences is important for future research and practice as educators and policy makers work to make learning environments more inclusive for students from marginalized and minoritized backgrounds. For example, culturally responsive approaches to School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports have attempted to incorporate student and family voices into conversations about school discipline (Bal et al., 2016; Leverson et al., 2021).

Concurrent with student empowerment is adapting methods such as youth participatory action research where students' voices are not only considered by the adults, but the students ensure their insights are integrated into local research practices and policy implementation (Aguayo et al., 2024). Although we wanted to amplify youth voices in our qualitative study, voice alone is not sufficient to help students feel empowered. Instead, helping students build agency has been linked with students' feeling empowered (Cook-Sather, 2018). Agency or action are understood as the ability to exert influence on learning contexts and transforming learning one's own and others' learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2020). One way to develop student agency is by viewing young individuals as agents of change and experts of their cultural contexts and lives who are capable of analyzing and exerting influence over their learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2014). This includes creating opportunities to transform research into action through youth-led participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra & McCormick, 2017; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009) and collaborative action research. These reformations require a shift in dynamic, recognizing students as possessing essential knowledge to transform learning environments and create conditions for sharing power and responsibility for educational contexts (Cook-Sather, 2020).

Conclusion

We specifically chose the Double Check CARES and Muñiz frameworks in this study because of the comprehensiveness of the Muñiz model and our ongoing work with CARES, and we wanted to further examine how student voice in relation to both. We found that some aspects of both models resonated with students, though they were also seeking foundational good teaching practices to undergird teachers' cultural responsiveness. As the field moves forward, it may require proposing or a examining a multi-tiered approach to CRP that has good teaching as the foundation that teachers must have in order to best implement more sensitive aspects of CRP such as making authentic connections to the curriculum for students. In addition, there may be a need to adapt existing or offer new proposed frameworks. With any of the recommended future directions, we conclude that the CRP research will benefit from codesign and participatory research approaches with youth who are the experts of their own lived experiences and the ones who experience CRPs in the classroom.

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Table 1

Models of Culturally Responsivity in Education

	Definition	Goals
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)	Teaching practices that, "produce students who can achieve academic success, help students develop a positive ethnic and cultural identity, and enable students to recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities" (p. 474, 1995)	Student learning and academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2021a)
Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2010)	Teaching practices that include "using the heritages, experiences, and perspectives of different ethnic and racial groups to teach students who are members of them more effectively." (Gay, 2015, p. 124)	"Equity, excellence, and justice for ethnically and racially diverse students" (Gay, 2014, 129)
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012)	Teaching practices that, "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (Paris, 2012, p. 95)	"Supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers" (Paris, 2012, p. 95)

Table 2

Comparing the Eight Competencies and Double Check CARES

Double Check CARES (Hershfeldt et al., 2009).	Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Muñiz, 2020)
Connection to the Curriculum: teachers connect students' cultural background to lessons while being cautious not to perpetuate ethnic stereotyping or tokenizing.	**Competency 3 Draw on students' culture to share curriculum and instruction:** teachers leverage student's cultural backgrounds and experiences to facilitate learning by critically evaluating textbooks and learning materials so as not to perpetuate stereotypes and to ensure representation of minoritized groups.
Authentic Relationships: promotes positive student-teacher relationship, which is associated with fewer problem behaviors among students.	**Competency 7 Promote collaborations with families and the local community:** teachers promote home-school partnerships by assuming that families and parents want to be involved in their child's education and school success. They seek to continually learn about and support the local community and families by gaining a deeper understanding of their cultural contexts, values, and expectations of their child's education
Reflective Thinking: teachers engage in critical self-reflection to assess their cultural group memberships in relation to their students.	**Competency 1 Reflecting on one's cultural lens:** educators critically reflect on their own life experiences and group memberships and how these constructs impact their values and beliefs to mitigate the real-life effects of implicit biases and stereotypes for students in schools.
Effective Communication: recognizing that non-traditional communication styles and norms may be a byproduct of culture and that discipline problems often result from cultural misunderstanding of difference as discipline problems.	**Competency 8 Communicate in linguistically and culturally responsive ways:** teachers communicate in ways that make families and communities feel welcome and encourages them to participate in their child's education. They recognize that different communication styles may result from differences in cultures and allow students to use their natural way of speaking in the classroom to accommodate and honor multilingualism.
Sensitivity to Students' Culture: the understanding that students' behaviors may not align with the school culture and behavioral expectations and that these behaviors reflect differences and not deficits.	**Competency 6 Promote respect for students' differences:** teachers are respectful and inclusive of differences by creating a classroom environment that helps students learn how to navigate differences. Teachers encourage the celebration of differences and help students to value their own and others' cultures by creating caring and respectful classrooms.
	Competency 2 Recognizing and redressing bias in the system: teachers move from just reflecting on their own cultural lens to considering and addressing institutional or structural challenges for students from marginalized and minoritized backgrounds
	Competency 4 Bring real-world issues into the classroom: helping students to recognize that what they learn is valuable to their families and communities and has real-world implications for identifying solutions.
	Competency 5 Modeling high expectations for all students: teachers believe that all students who are provided with appropriate supports and resources are capable of achieving school success. This involves recognizing and not playing into negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of racially and ethnically minoritized students.

Table 3

Student Self-Reported Demographics by Race and Gender

Race/Ethnicity	N	Gender
Black	31	16 females, 15 males
Black/White	5	3 females, 2 males
Black/Native American	2	1 female, 1 male
Black/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	1 female, 1 male
Latine	15	8 females, 7 males
Latine/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	1 Male
White/Non-Latine	40	18 females, 22 males
White/Latine	4	2 females, 2 males
White/Native American/Non-Latine	3	3 females
Total	103	

Table 4

Eight Competencies for Culturally Responsive Teaching and CARES Coding

	Coded Excerpts				Coded Excerpts		
Eight Competencies for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Muñiz, 2020)	**Students of Color (*n* = 63)**	**White Students (*n* = 34)**	**Heterogeneous (*n* = 6)**	**Double Check CARES Framework (Hershfeldt, 2010)**	**Students of Color (*n* = 63*)**	**White Students (*n* = 34)**	**Heterogeneous (*n* = 6)**
Competency 1: Reflect on One's Cultural Lens	5	1	0	Connection to the Curriculum	0	1	1
Competency 2: Recognize and Redress Bias in the System	0	0	0	Authentic Relationships	16	13	1
Competency 3: Draw on students' culture to share curriculum and instruction	0	1	1	Reflective Thinking	7	4	0
Competency 4: Bring Real-world Issues into the Classroom	0	0	0	Effective Communication	13	2	1
Competency 5: Model High Expectations for All Students	2	3	0	Sensitivity to Students' Cultures	10	4	0
Competency 6: Promote Respect for Students Differences	14	4	0				
Competency 7: Collaborate with Families and the Local Community	0	0	**0**				
Competency 8: Communicate in Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Ways	1	1					
No code	41 (65%)	25 (74%)	5		23 (37%)	15 (44%)	3 (50%)

*Note that the CARES codes for Students of Color and White students sum to more than 63 and 40, respectively, because some excerpts aligned with multiple CARES components