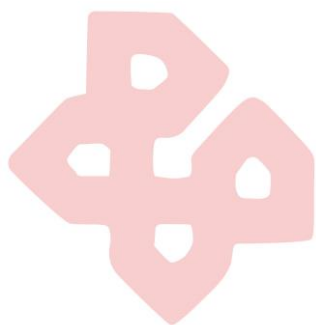




## **TEACHER EMBODIMENT OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGIES IN A FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM**

*LA APLICACIÓN POR PARTE DE LOS PROFESORES DE LAS PEDAGOGÍAS QUE TIENEN EN CUENTA LA CULTURA EN UN AULA DE QUINTO GRADO*



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### **Abstract:**

Schools need better roadmaps for accomplishing culturally responsive pedagogy and intercultural education. In this article, I feature the culturally responsive practices of a Black teacher situated in an elementary classroom in the U.S. Her practices contribute to a roadmap for enacting culturally responsive pedagogy that incorporates small group instruction and cooperative learning. I also contend that queries investigating pedagogies affirming minoritized students must consider the primary actors charged to implement such work. In addition to her pedagogical practices, I include data that elucidate how the teacher's racial biography is explicitly tied to the culturally responsive work she engages in the classroom. I conclude with considerations for how this case study might offer educators, researchers, and policymakers' ideas for deep integration of intercultural education.

**Key Words:** *culturally responsive pedagogy and practices; teacher embodiment; teacher race*

### **Resumen:**

Las escuelas necesitan mejores maneras para lograr una pedagogía culturalmente receptiva y una educación intercultural. En este artículo, presento las prácticas culturalmente receptivas de una



maestra negra ubicada en un aula de primaria en los EE. UU. Sus prácticas contribuyen a un ejemplo excepcional para demostrar una pedagogía culturalmente receptiva que incorpora la instrucción en grupos pequeños y el aprendizaje cooperativo. También sostengo que las investigaciones de las pedagogías que afirman a los estudiantes minoritarios deben considerar a los principales actores encargados de implementar dicho trabajo. Además de sus prácticas pedagógicas, incluyo datos que aclaran cómo la biografía racial de la maestra está explícitamente ligada al trabajo culturalmente receptiva que realiza en el aula. Concluyo con consideraciones sobre cómo este caso podría ofrecer a los educadores, investigadores y formuladores de políticas ideas para una integración profunda de la educación intercultural.

**Palabras clave:** *Pedagogía y prácticas culturalmente receptiva; encarnación del maestro; la raza de maestros*

## 1. Introduction

Culturally responsive pedagogies have been written about for 30 years now in the U.S. and have morphed in numerous iterations and forms (Gay, 2018). One overarching principle that has guided such efforts is the validation of communities marginalized by culture, race, and language. Similarly, intercultural pedagogies in Europe have sought for an inclusive education amidst increased immigration waves in which racial diversity is perceived poorly (Portera, 2011). Culturally responsive pedagogies in the U.S. were necessary after the Supreme court ruling for *Brown v. The Board of Education* mandated the integration of Black students in white-only schools. Concurrently, tens of thousands of Black teachers in the U.S. were ushered out of the teaching profession as Black schools were shut down, and white teachers were forced to teach a demographic of students with which they had little knowledge or preparation (Fergus, 2017). In 2014, minoritized populations eclipsed the number of white students in the U.S. and will only grow to become more racially diverse (Pew Research, 2014). The immigrant population in Spain continues to rise, yet substantive changes to genuinely implement intercultural education are lacking (Aguado & Malik, 2001).

The evolution of the U.S. student demographic necessitates schooling that equally supports students of color to thrive, which requires the ability for students to bring their entire cultural and linguistic identities into classrooms. This is currently infeasible given the ways learning practices hinge on White cultural norms (Milner, 2015). In Spain, students from immigrant backgrounds are unable to receive equitable education when they are interpreted in deficit ways, are often tracked into low-level classes, and perceived to have special needs (Aguado-Odina, Mata-Benito, & Gil-Juarena, 2017). Our pedagogical models, therefore, require better roadmaps. These roadmaps need portraits of what cultural responsiveness looks like in practice for teachers, school administrators, and families interested in transformative learning (Sleeter, 2011). This study, therefore, contributes to the roadmaps of culturally responsive and intercultural practices, which can be instructive in understanding what such pedagogies look like in the day-to-day operations of a classroom.

A roadmap, however, is useless without a competent driver who can keep all passengers safe along the way. The cultural competence of teachers (Ladson-Billings,

2009), their care (Gay, 2018), and the unique cultural lens they can offer (Irvine, 2003) all underscore the significance of teachers functioning as an important driver in realizing culturally responsive and intercultural pedagogies. While they cannot be responsible for the terrain of school contexts, teachers are the primary arbiters of how race and language are either received or marginalized in classrooms (Lee, 2020). In the past, I have offered notions of teacher embodiment (Lee, 2015) that explicitly connect a teacher's cultural and racial background with the pedagogy one enacts. My exploration of instructional practices, then, is deeply tied to the teacher herself, which coalesces with her racialized biography. This paper, therefore, contributes to both the roadmap of what culturally responsive and intercultural practices look like in the classroom, as well as the role of the teacher as the primary vehicle for enacting such work. Within an elementary-aged context, this study asks: What are the practices of a culturally responsive and intercultural teacher, and what role does one's racial background play in the pedagogies enacted?

## 2. Theoretical Context

### 2.1. Culturally Responsive and Intercultural Practices and Pedagogy

In the U.S., culturally responsive pedagogy has been employed as an overarching term to describe the various pedagogies that attune to the learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and its teaching practices have been defined as, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2018, p. 36). At the center of this definition are the ethnically diverse students this pedagogical approach seeks to support. This is important because while this paper identifies culturally responsive practices that may appear to be “good for all students,” what defines and nuances these practices from other theoretically sound practices are the ways they are responsive to ethnically diverse students. Culturally responsive practices cover a multitude of dimensions within the classroom—from curriculum and instructional strategies to teacher disposition towards race and equity, particularly as it relates to their relationship with students and their families. This pedagogical approach understands culture in dynamic ways, and its central role in learning and cultivating a safe learning environment. Since culturally responsive pedagogies were historically developed to advocate for racially marginalized students in the U.S., this pedagogical approach specifically focuses on them. Within a European context in which marginality often takes form in students' citizenship status, culturally responsive pedagogies are still applicable, regardless of the number of students with marginalized citizenship status. Ultimately, culturally responsive pedagogies seek to serve all students, and considers those most marginalized as a baseline to consider how all students are being served.

In Europe, terminologies such as multicultural, transcultural, and intercultural have all been employed to describe ways in which people across different nationalities, cultures, and borders can coexist peacefully and respectfully (Portera,

2011). While it has been contested which terminology is most appropriate, there is a case for adopting “intercultural” because of its emphasis on the interactive and integrative nature by which disparate people can share geographies. The term “multicultural” in European contexts has connoted a descriptive approach towards mutual respect, while “transcultural” has focused on the universal elements of all people groups (Portera, 2011). Ultimately, those who have advocated for “intercultural education” seek a term in which culture is understood in dynamic ways, and those with different cultural backgrounds offer positive opportunities to interact, learn, and grow with one another. Still, there has been strong criticism regarding the actual implementation of intercultural education as scarce (Aguado-Odina et al., 2017) and colonizing in nature when it does not address systemic power differentials and oppression of minoritized communities (Gorski, 2008). While the work of culturally responsive pedagogy has become popularized in recent decades, its implementation, too, has faced difficulty in moving beyond cultural superficialities (Ladson-Billings, 2014). However, its roots and inception emerged out of the work of Black teachers (Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, the majority of successful examples of culturally responsive pedagogies have historically been tied to teachers from minoritized communities who share cultural and racial backgrounds with their students. Given the U.S. context of this study, I focus on the literature and theoretical underpinnings from culturally responsive pedagogies as part of how I frame my data and findings.

In literature examining culturally responsive pedagogy enacted across multiple subjects in K-12 contexts in the U.S., studies show that this approach has been tied to positive student outcomes, particularly in the form of: 1) higher performance of tests and other assessments, 2) greater student engagement in content, and 3) increased agency in student’s racial identities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Culturally responsive practices feature the important roles of small group instruction and cooperative learning across content (Sharan, 2015), including math (Hurley, Boykin, & Allen, 2005; Ukpokodu, 2011), literacy, and science (Ardasheva et al., 2019). Small group instruction has been lauded as an exemplary teaching practice in supporting student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). While this practice is often utilized within cooperative learning, Sharon (2015) draws on Brody and Davidson (1998) to define cooperative learning as: “work in groups toward a common goal or outcome; or share a common problem or task, in such a way that they can only succeed in completing the work through behaviour that demonstrates interdependence, while holding individual contributions and efforts accountable” (p. 87). This paper, then, seeks to contribute to extant literature about how small group instruction and cooperative learning are utilized in culturally responsive practices. We will see how cooperative learning is taken up through the online educational resource, Classcraft. This resource provides each student with an online profile and allows teachers to create simulations, educational games, and scavenger hunts for teams of students to participate. The teacher in this paper often utilized Classcraft to encourage cooperative learning, wherein students were placed in small groups and participated in these activities through their online profiles. Furthermore, the pedagogy featured in this paper meet Nieto’s (2013) definition of social justice in

education: 1) disrupting inequality; 2) providing material and emotional resources (including care for students); 3) building on students' strengths and not accepting deficit ideologies about them; and 4) promoting a democratic learning environment.

Gay (2018) contends that a primary pillar undergirding culturally responsive practices is care for students. She distinguishes *caring for vis-a-vis caring about* students by the “active engagement in doing something to positively affect” students, which extends beyond “feelings of concern for one’s state of being” (p. 58). Culturally responsive care, then, is defined by not only the sentiment a teacher holds for students, but also the work that is produced from such sentiment. This work can be described in the following way: “...teachers who really care for students honor their humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them, and use strategies to fulfill their expectations” (Gay, 2018, p. 59). Thus, culturally responsive care is an active pedagogy that works to positively foment learning, particularly through the use of strategies in holding high expectations which stem from respect and esteem for students.

In this paper, I employ this definition of culturally responsive care as I trace how it undergirds the instructional use of small group instruction and cooperative learning and is interwoven with high expectations. High expectations within culturally responsive pedagogy departs from other notions of high expectations in schooling that can be taken up in deficit ways. In my own experiences as a former elementary teacher and also as a current teacher educator, I have commonly heard the use of “high expectations” as a White hegemonic standard placed on culturally and linguistically diverse students. Within this context, teachers will purport to hold “high expectations” for racialized students by insisting that they conform to behaviors exhibited by their White peers (e.g., “Bob always gets his homework done every night, so should everyone else”). Doing so, however, reifies inaccurate meritocratic ideologies (McNamee & Miller, 2009), which view the work of individuals through a lens of one’s efforts and work ethic. Merit-based views are inaccurate because they do not account for the historic and institutionalized discrepancies between how White people and People of Color have been treated, especially Black communities. Applied in a schooling context, this attribute a White student getting his homework done each night to his work ethic without consideration for the fact that the family has benefitted from historic legislative and institutionalized practices that afford him the financial and resource support to live a life unencumbered by worry for basic needs. Thus, there is a need to distinguish common deficit uses of “high expectations” that are steeped in meritocratic notions from culturally responsive high expectations which are imbued with care and work towards positive outcomes for racialized students. Heretofore, my reference to “high expectations” in this paper draws on culturally responsive high expectations and it is interpreted as an extension of the teacher’s care as she utilizes culturally responsive practices for racially diverse students’ academic success.

## 2.2. Teacher Embodiment as Lived Pedagogy

As previously mentioned, culturally responsive practices are akin to a roadmap for better understanding what culturally responsive pedagogy looks like in the day-to-day operations of the classroom. However, in addition to an accurate roadmap is the need for a competent driver who can safely transport passengers in the journey. The driver in the classroom is the teacher, and the work of enacting culturally responsive practices ultimately comes from the teacher. It would be remiss, then, to explore the ways culture needs to be a central component in pedagogy without regard to how culture is also a central component within the teacher. In previous work (Lee, 2015; 2020), I have offered a framework to explore this, which I have termed, “Teacher Embodiment as Lived Pedagogy.” Through it, I theorize how teachers embody racialized life experiences and the ways pedagogy is a *lived* expression of these cumulative experiences. I define “embodiment” as an action or process (either conscious or subconscious) whereby events or practices from any area of life become an integral part of a person. I conceptualize “lived pedagogy” as the creative craft that is an extension of *who* the teacher is. Taken together, I posit that race critically shapes: 1) the formation of who a teacher is, and 2) how and what she elects to prioritize in pedagogy.

Conceptually, this lens extends on cultural practice theory and critical race theory. Cultural practice theory (Miller & Goodnow, 1995) asserts that individuals form diverse trajectories of development as they engage in life activities, and, in the process of participating in such events, are transformed. People and their contexts, therefore, are mutually constitutive, and are not viewed as separate entities. I draw on this process to consider how teachers and their context of pedagogical work are not separate but are in a continuous process of shaping one another. Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) underscores how racism is insidious within myriad institutions and informs my notions of embodiment to view a teacher’s formation through the realities of a racial hierarchy. I apply the lens of Teacher Embodiment as Lived Pedagogy to consider the unique racial apparatus teachers of color have, and to consider how the enactment of culturally responsive pedagogies are a lived expression of who they are as racialized beings. In this paper, and in other work (Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Lee, in press) I focus specifically on Black teachers.

I use the terms “race” and “culture” interchangeably in this paper, but I also want to specify the distinctions in these notions. I understand race to be a construct based on one’s phenotype that socially stratifies societies around the world (Omi & Winant, 2014). I draw on cultural practice theories (Miller & Goodnow, 1995) to understand culture as a dynamic descriptor of how people live and participate in the world within traditions that continue to evolve. These ideas overlap in the ways they can describe recognized practices that exist within racialized communities. Additionally, culturally responsive pedagogies were originally developed to support students who were racialized in the U.S. As they do in the U.S., these notions also exist in European contexts, but can be nuanced differently given the various nation states that comprise Europe.

### 3. Methods

Ethnographic case study methodology is appropriate in exploring instantiations of larger phenomena (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The case featured in this paper is part of a multi-case study, which examined the culturally responsive practices of teachers and what role racial background played in the enactment of such practices. Thus, data collection and sources were bounded by this phenomenon of interest. Also of central importance throughout the research process is researcher positionality, which shapes our research questions and plays a significant role in how we collect, analyze, and interpret data (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Researchers working within marginalized communities have a duty to materially benefit those with whom they research, and to deconstruct the dominance of Whiteness (Lee & Lee, 2021). As a Chinese American woman, I work in community with Black scholars to propel an anti-racist education for Black students as well as students of color writ large. I seek praxis in this work as I utilize any racial privileges, I hold towards identifying and fighting white supremacist mechanisms in spheres across my life. This positionality shapes how I critically approach phenomena for inquiry, the ways I care for and relate with research participants, the frames by which I interpret data, and the larger work of positioning my scholarship in confronting white hegemony.

Data collection occurred between September 2019-September 2020, which began with a process of obtaining nominations from school administration and community members for culturally responsive teachers. Yvette Jay (self-selected pseudonym) was selected after a process of initial interviews and classroom observation based on her knowledge of and responsiveness to students' cultures and language in pedagogy and rapport. Yvette is located in a small urban city in the U.S. Midwest, and identifies herself as a middle-aged Black woman. Her fifth-grade classroom consisted of 22 students in which 18 of them are Black, and four of them are White.

Given the parameters of this case, primary data sources focused on Yvette—

interviews with her and classroom observations. Other data included classroom artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, images of teacher-produced handouts and PowerPoint slides, student work), and interviews with students and parents. Within the scope of this paper, however, I feature interview data with Yvette and data from my classroom observations. Interviews were ethnographic in nature since they occurred over an extended period of time and sought to learn about the racial life experiences that have shaped who she is today. Classroom observations occurred twice weekly for two to three hours at a time. Interviews and observations were audio and video recorded and were transcribed after data collection. Data collection and data analysis coalesced as fieldnotes and analytic memos were written throughout data collection to record important events, and to consider patterns and themes of life experiences and pedagogical work. After most data were collected, in-depth data analysis involved an iterative process of open and selective coding, in which selective codes were collapsed into larger themes (Charmaz, 2014). I constantly compared data from Yvette's interviews and observations to develop

thematic and theoretical categories. Notions of culturally responsive pedagogies and teacher embodiment functioned as theoretical lenses to interpret data. The findings feature data that shows how Yvette's practices are not devoid of her racial background, and how such experiences play a role in living culturally responsive pedagogy.

#### 4. Findings

In the first set of data, I highlight the ways Yvette exhibits care for her students, followed by examples of how such care is interwoven in her math, history, and literacy instruction. The second set of data will show how her racialized experiences as a Black mother played an important role in who she is as a teacher and the work she conducted in the classroom. I specifically show how her experiences homeschooling her Black sons and participating in their classrooms once they entered public schools shaped her expectations for her own students and the strategies she leveraged. The order of data presented is intentional because I am cautious not to frame a causal relationship between Yvette's racial biography and her enactment of culturally responsive work. Though the two are interrelated, I do not want to oversimplify their relationship, since the emphasis is on the *existence* of such a relationship, and it is not linear in nature. Instead, I interweave the personal racialized experiences and her professional pedagogical work.

##### 4.1. Care For Students Through High Expectations

In an early interview with Yvette, I inquired into her reasons for becoming a teacher, and the experiences that shaped what kind of teacher she wanted to be. As will be shared in more detail in proceeding data, Yvette discussed how she was heavily involved in her children's education beginning in their preschool years. Later in elementary school, she continued to volunteer as a parent in their classrooms and assisted the teacher with students' instructional needs. During this time, she observed a cultural mismatch between the African American students and White teachers, in which the White teachers often had deficit perspectives and low expectations of students based on their family background. In the excerpt below, Yvette responds to such deficit perspectives of the students and describes the kind of teacher she aspires to be.

... I wanted to be able to provide families with the kind of teacher that's going to push, ...I don't want to be the type of teacher that just accepts ... some kids are just not going to make it or that kind of mentality ...I don't want to accept, well, just because so and so looks like that, or their family's never going to college, or their family never graduated from high school or whatever, I didn't want that to be an excuse for any child not to succeed. Because I feel that every student, every child can learn... If I'm going to be their teacher, it's my job to create the environment that allows them to learn. It's not going to look the same for every student. ... You may have 21 students who learn 21 different ways... But as the teacher, it's my job to



target their learning style, and to help them grow. And sometimes what I was seeing in the public school system was not that...

Yvette's initial response was to be a teacher who would "push" and not "just accept" that some students "are just not going to make it." She explicated what this "push" entails for students—namely, a belief and expectation that "every child is able to learn." This attitude starkly contrasted that of the White teachers, which was an acceptance that students would not be academically successful due to their family's background. While this acceptance appeared to be understanding of students' contexts, it was deficit in nature because it placed an onus on Black students and families who have been historically marginalized to arise out of systemic barriers rather than hold schools accountable for the ways they support White hegemonic practices at the expense of Black students' learning needs.

Conversely, Yvette's "push" for students was an expectation that comes with her institutional support as a teacher, and to "create the environment that allows them to learn" with an individualized focus on each student having different learning needs. Her "push" and high expectation was also offered as what she can "provide families," so we see that Yvette's academic expectations of students were framed within care for both Black students and their families. It is also important to note that her expectations were not simply a standard she holds for students, and one that she expected students to reach by their own efforts. Integral to her high expectations was her support by providing responsive instruction and a conducive learning environment. This support is evidence that Yvette's expectations were undergirded by care for students and their families. In all these ways, Yvette showed culturally responsive high expectations because they were coupled with instructional support and care for students. In the following data, I feature the ways Yvette offered instructional support through small group and cooperative learning across various content subjects, and how her expectations and care were enmeshed within such pedagogical work.

#### 4.2. Small Group Math Instruction

Math instruction in the U.S. is often conducted in whole group settings in which there is little room to differentiate instruction for individuals. Yvette, however, set up math time in her classroom to run in small groups, and she utilized this instructional practice in setting culturally responsive expectations. Math instruction began as she projected students' names by groups on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. Each group was assigned a particular center, which consisted of a math activity or task they would work on in groups. Centers were located at different locations in the classroom and groups would rotate to a new center every 15 minutes. One of the centers met with Yvette for guided instruction that was targeted at students' particular needs. This approach provided organization for students to move around the room, engage in various math activities, and ensured that Yvette met with students in small groups on a daily basis.

Yvette's expectation during the 15-minute guided instruction was high as she kept an intense focus on the math concepts and re-directed discussion of any other topics in order to focus on every student's math needs within their allotted group time. She was also concerned that students at other centers were focused on math learning as well. During one observation, students at another center located by a window were distracted by another class at recess. In this instance, Yvette immediately informed students that they were, "more focused on what's going on outside than you are on your task cards" and "all that extra stuff is disrupting my group right now." She emphasized respect for the learning environment and also their peers' right to learn. Monitoring students at various locations across the room while also instructing her own small group was not an easy endeavor. At times, however, distractions came from within the small group Yvette was instructing. Below she explains how to multiply fractions when a student attempts to change the subject.

Yvette: So we're multiplying both the numerator and the denominator by two. And that 2 tells me that I have to divide my rectangular fraction model into two parts. I do that by drawing how many horizontal lines?

Student 1: two

Yvette: if I'm dividing into two parts?

Student 1: Oh, 3 (other students say one), no 1

Yvette: One is correct. One. I see that Kiana has that. Thank you.

Student 2: this morning, my mom...on the radio.

Yvette: Tell me about that later. All right. Now, I know that Sam has already used mental math. Kiana has already used mental math. Now you can either count the parts, or you can do the mental math and your multiplication.

We see here that Yvette kept her focus on the math concept when a student wanted to tell her about something she heard on the radio. It is important to note that Yvette did not correct her for bringing in another topic, but was able to keep the focus on instruction while also expressing interest in what the student wanted to say when she said, "Tell me about that later." Running small group instruction was not a clean-cut pedagogical endeavor, and these kinds of instances occurred many times every day. In my time observing Yvette, she consistently displayed this focus during small group instruction, which was a by-product of her high expectations of students and their learning environment. This is especially clear in the next data excerpt in which math time was complete, and students returned back to their seats. The centers were cleaned up, and she concluded with reminders about what is important during math time and a reflection on how the class performed.

Yvette: All right, you guys did really, really well. For the most part with our rotation, some of us still need to work on our volume levels. Now, I know that ...you guys have fun with Splash Math ... a lot of you are doing really well with the skills you're practicing on Splash Math, but you must must must remember that small group instruction is important. So you should not interfere with anyone else's or your own opportunity to learn by not following this current expectation when I have small group going. Is that understood?

All students in chorus: Yes Mrs. Jay!!

Yvette: So the things that we need to work on is our volume level, and making sure that we respect our own right to learn and our peers' right to learn, okay? Because I want to make sure everyone is understanding the concepts that are being taught. So, this afternoon when we do our literacy rotations, let's try to do a better job at respecting the rights to learn, respecting the learning environment and making sure we control that volume meter...Otherwise, though, I'm very proud of you. I'm also very proud of a lot of the progress that I saw during the math rotation with large groups....

Here Yvette explicitly stated the significance of small group instruction. She re-emphasized her expectations during this time, particularly with regards to volume level and their progress on Splash Math, one of the online math programs used at a center. From Yvette's perspective, we see that this expectation was directly tied to students' rights and opportunity to learn. Students' enthusiastic response was a common phenomenon when Yvette would broadcast her expectations throughout the day, and students would respond in unison "yes Mrs. Jay" or "yes Ma'am!" This enthusiasm was, in part, because Yvette's expectations were an extension of her care for the students, and they knew it, because she was explicit about how proud she was of them and their progress. At the end, she alluded to their literacy time also being organized in small group instruction, with similar expectations. In the next section, we see how high expectations were extended in learning history and literacy concepts.

### 4.3. Cooperative Learning in Content-based Literacy Events

Literacy time also functioned in small group rotations. On special occasions, however, she planned online scavenger hunts through Class Craft, an online educational gaming platform designed for classrooms. As previously mentioned, cooperative learning involves working towards a shared or common goal that requires interdependence and accountability in order for group success. Thus, these scavenger hunts were a source of cooperative learning as the students worked in small groups toward a common task that required accurate completion in order to move through a series of challenges. All members in a group were held responsible for completing work, and the group that completed the series of challenges won the scavenger hunt. In the data that follows, Yvette utilized cooperative learning to uphold culturally responsive expectations.

It was the days leading up to Thanksgiving break, and Yvette wanted to engage students in a fun activity that would review literacy concepts and offer new history facts. These scavenger hunts often took the place of regular instruction since they would begin in the morning and last most of the school day. I remember walking into the classroom during these scavenger hunts and there would always be a buzz of excitement as groups of students were huddled in different areas across the room, with some groups silent as they focused on completing a challenge, and other groups in louder debate about what was the correct answer. Yvette prepared small prizes for the winning group, and this incentive provided a healthy competition among groups. Unlike math and literacy times, students were able to choose their own groups, which increased the potential of enjoyment for many.

In the data excerpt below, one group completed an activity in the scavenger hunt, and it needed to be checked by Yvette in order for them to move onto the next challenge. In this activity, students read an article that compared and contrasted how Thanksgiving was celebrated in the past and present. Each member of the group was required to complete a Venn diagram that detailed these items, with a minimum of three facts from the article.

Yvette: Have you all put your three facts? I should see three facts in each part. You did more? If you did more, that's awesome.

Students: I think we did more

Mrs. Jay: (as she reviews their Venn diagram) Okay, how does the watermelon facts fit into the compare and contrast Thanksgiving in the past and Thanksgiving today? [Students respond] Okay, but your article, did it talk about watermelon in the article? No. Okay, so that's just a fact you pulled out of your hat? It needs to relate to the article. So if there's no watermelon mentioned in the article, it shouldn't be mentioned on your paper. And I don't know anyone who usually eats watermelon for Thanksgiving anyway [said in a playful way].

Students chime in: I do!

Mrs. Jay: Okay, well, I want traditional facts. So go back and erase that one and give me some. ...All right, team three. Let's go.

In this task, students needed to provide at least three accurate facts in order to proceed to the next challenge. Despite this being a fun activity before the holiday, Yvette still held students accountable to her expectations of cooperative learning and did not move them onto the next challenge. This learning engaged students in a content-based literacy activity that required them to successfully complete it together. After students reconvened with their group and revised the facts in the Venn diagram, they came back to Yvette's table for her to check their work.

Yvette: ...since you have three facts that were accurate, I'll give it to you. Excellent. I think you're ready for the next one...

[Yvette returns their sheets and takes out the next challenge in the scavenger hunt.]

Student: It's hard, isn't it?

Yvette: It's not hard. This next one, all you have to do is come up with random words, random adjectives. ... remember, we talked about—what does a proper noun do?

Student: Who's winning so far?

Yvette: It names a specific person, place or thing? Remember? We did that, we studied that for the test.

Student: It's hard

Teacher: It's not hard! ...

We see Yvette has held students to her expectation of providing sufficient number of facts. As she transitioned them to the next literacy challenge, students were worried that the activity was too difficult for them. She expressed her belief that students are capable of the work ("It's not hard"), and continued to hold the expectation that they complete this task to move onto the next one. She supported their learning by reviewing the definitions of proper nouns, and does not concede to students' own belief that the task is too difficult for them ("it's hard").

Another aspect of cooperative learning consists of holding individual members accountable for contributing to a common task. Yvette held this expectation of cooperative learning for all group members in the scavenger hunt, and in the interaction below, we see her conversation with a student who was not contributing to his group.

Yvette: Okay, Noah step in. We do understand this is a team effort. Correct? Okay, and I've already constantly gotten on you today about not contributing to your team. Correct? Okay, and what I did stipulate was that if you refuse to join and participate in the team effort, then I will not include you on the incentive if your team wins. You have to do your part because they've already lost several minutes of time because you refuse to do your work. So you have to decide now, are you going to engage in the team activity? Or are you going to do it independently? Are you participating?

Noah: Yes, it's just that they're not including me

Yvette: Okay, you have to be part of the team, your team has been at that crate bench all morning, working as a team. Join in them ... they're not supposed to come over and force you to do. You are supposed to get actively engaged, which means you choose to walk over, sit with your team, engage in the conversation and do your part. You have to pull your weight. Now, [speaking to the team] you all should not be deliberately not including him, but you [to Noah] should be actively participating. They're not supposed to hold your hand and beg you to participate. You do your job. Does that make sense?

Yvette's expectation for each member to actively participate is consistent with characteristics of cooperative learning. These expectations also extend beyond the academic focus to include their social well-being as a group. Her expectation for them to produce accurate work and for each person to learn and contribute comes with her support as she mediates on their behalf. We know that cooperative learning is not always smooth sailing, and requires support and guidance not only in content, but also in what occurs socially as well.

Through the data above, it is evident that Yvette upholds culturally responsive expectations as she utilizes small group instruction and cooperative learning as instructional practices. What distinguishes Yvette's culturally responsive expectations from those entrenched in meritocratic ideologies is the support and care she offers students in order to meet her expectations. Inherent in her culturally responsive work is that Black students and families are not to blame for the disparate opportunities that have been historically afforded between White and Black communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Instead, Yvette understands that institutions have a responsibility in closing this opportunity gap, and she takes on this responsibility in her institutional role as teacher.

#### 4.4. Embodied Racial Life Experiences

Too often, the pedagogical work of teachers is featured with little attention or query as to how such pedagogical work came to be. For teachers of color, as well as those from minoritized and/or immigrant backgrounds, it is important to consider how their personhood has contributed to such work. Understanding this can significantly shift our approaches to realizing culturally responsive pedagogies in

schools. Yvette's embodiment includes the racialized life experiences that she brings to her pedagogical work. Critical race and cultural practice theories inform us that her Blackness in America is experienced across myriad areas of her life, and that these racialized experiences have shaped her ways of knowing and living in the world. Teacher Embodiment as Lived Pedagogy bridges her racialized epistemology with her work in the classroom to understand how her pedagogy is an extension of her Black womanhood. The following data highlights some of her experiences as a mother of Black boys, and how her experiences with them translated to her approach with students.

In an interview, Yvette shared about her eldest son attending kindergarten. She noticed the teacher paying little instructional attention to her son, and linked this to the low expectations teachers often have of Black boys. In response, she decided to withdraw him from the school and to homeschool him. The following is an activity she created for him.

Yvette: ...he is a visual learner, much like his mom, and so I found that I spent a lot of time creating really interesting things for him to do. So when I taught him the alphabet, we did it by fashioning a basketball kind of thing in the house ... I wrote the letters of the alphabet on the little paper ball. He's such a sports fanatic...so every time he would shoot the ball, he had to say the letter that was on the ball. ... he would just start feeding it in...until it became one of our things... so it's one of his favorite stories to share.

Yvette foregrounded the story with the fact that her son is a “visual learner,” and how she centered his learning needs and preferences. Not only was she knowledgeable about his interests (“He’s such a sports fanatic”), but her care for his learning was expressed by “creating really interesting things for him to do,” such as the basketball game in teaching the alphabet. The creation of a learning activity inspired by her son’s interests and needs paralleled Yvette’s belief that all children can learn, and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to know and attune to individual learning needs. The work of attuning to each child also emerged in her small group instruction, which provided a structure for her to scaffold each child’s learning vis-a-vis whole group instruction. We also witnessed Yvette’s work in creating interesting learning engagements in the digital scavenger hunts she prepared for her students. In our interviews and my classroom observations, it was clear that the same awareness Yvette had of society’s low expectations of Black boys informed her pedagogical work with the Black students in her classroom.

In the next interview excerpt, Yvette shared about when her eldest son re-enrolled in public school in his late elementary years, and she volunteered as a “room mom,” in which she frequently assisted the teacher in the classroom. While there, she witnessed frustration from both the teacher and students, and shared how she would have handled things differently at times.

So teachers were frustrated because managing certain behaviors was not easy for them ... And students, I think were frustrated because the teachers ...didn't know how to relate to their frustrations. And I think that a lot of it was that kids didn't

understand why they were frustrated. They just knew something in them was feeling some kind of way. And they were acting it out, and ... were unable to communicate it ... Most of the classrooms I was in were my own children's classroom. ... [The students] experiencing this were African American, and their teachers were Caucasian. And so there, to me, seemed to be a barrier between the two. ... teachers not knowing how to relate to the African American students, and the students not being able to communicate their needs in a way that was understandable.

Yvette shared the above excerpt in the same interview and context of the first data excerpt at the beginning of the findings regarding the kind of teacher she aspired to be. Here she delineated the “barrier” White teachers had with Black students as they did not know “how to relate” to students, and students frustrated by not being able to communicate with the teacher. These comments were contextualized in a portion of the interview in which Yvette discussed how witnessing this communicative barrier between White teachers and Black students functioned as an impetus for her to be the teacher she is today. This was evident in the first data excerpt in which Yvette said, “But as the teacher, it's my job to target their learning style, and to help them grow. And sometimes what I was seeing in the public school system was not that.” Her pedagogical work, then, was shaped by her racialized experiences as a Black mother, and the care, support, and expectations she showed her students were a continuance of the care she sought for her own children.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The data presented in this paper show how Yvette lives culturally responsive pedagogy as she cares for racially diverse students through high expectations that pushed them to academically achieve out of a belief that they can do so. In practice, this looked like the individualized attention she offered students through small group instruction, fostering cooperative learning, and helping students see their own capabilities. Yvette's culturally responsive expectations were undergirded by a care for students that extended beyond sentiment and propelled them to learn and grow in an environment that encouraged them along the way.

Yvette's pedagogical work can be interpreted as a lived expression of her racialized embodiment as a Black mother. Through her experiences witnessing teachers' low expectations of Black boys and the lack of cultural competence of White teachers, Yvette made the decision to become a teacher—first with her own children, and later in a predominantly Black school. Homeschooling her sons shaped her as a teacher to center student interests and needs through interactive activities. Yvette's life experiences, then, afforded her a racial apparatus she drew on in offering culturally responsive pedagogy, practices, expectations, and care for the Black students in her classroom.

As we continue to develop more roadmaps for what culturally responsive pedagogies look like in the day-to-day operations of the classroom, equally important is the existence of a culturally competent driver who has the capacity to navigate

the rocky terrains of racist schooling practices, and cares for students in a way that delivers them into safe passage of learning. The central role of culture in learning has been well established, and it is long overdue to also consider the central role of culture in *the teacher*. While demographics differ in other countries, commonly teachers of the dominant culture do not understand, and may harm, students of backgrounds different from theirs. More research is needed in considering how a teacher's culture, race, and language shape the pedagogical work they do in classrooms. Understanding this phenomenon can shift how we approach the enactment of culturally responsive pedagogies and provide insight as we seek practices that center culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Within a European context of enacting intercultural education, work is still needed to employ cooperative practices for social and academic goals (Aguado-Odina et al., 2017). Yvette's culturally responsive practices highlighted in this study can offer pedagogical examples of how small group instruction and cooperative learning can exist in classrooms that serve students in European countries with a variety of citizenship status. As schools seek to broaden students' participatory learning engagements, Yvette's work illuminates how such engagements are undergirded by a care for student learning and their well-being. Gorski (2008) contends that teachers' consciousness of sociopolitical power in schooling, curricula, and students are imperative for decolonizing intercultural education. Data from Yvette's life reveal how her sociopolitical consciousness was shaped by her own racial and cultural experiences. My notions of teacher embodiment elucidate how Yvette's racial biography is explicitly tied to the pedagogical work she lives in her classroom. A teacher's biography, then, matters in the work of seeking equitable education for students from marginalized and immigrant backgrounds. If intercultural education is a priority, then attention must be paid to the biographies of teachers we hope will enact inclusive pedagogies. As educators, researchers, and policymakers pursue deep integration of intercultural education, it must be asked: Do teachers have intercultural experiences with which they can draw on? Are teachers from marginalized and immigrant backgrounds represented among those expected to enact intercultural education? Such criteria are a starting point in recruiting and preparing teachers for intercultural work.

My notions of teacher embodiment also have applicability within a European context as it relates to both racial and cultural difference among teachers and students. While the role of culture is underscored within intercultural work, the role of race exists and continues to be problematic in Europe as well. For example, Mpanzu Bamenga, a Black Dutch national, recently lost a legal case in which the Dutch court ruled that "ethnicity" could be a criterion for border checks (Corder, 2021). The way in which "ethnicity" is operationalized within Dutch courts is parallel to U.S. constructs of race whereby Bamenga's Blackness is conceived as his "ethnicity" in the Netherlands. This case reifies that "ethnicity" is tied to non-white people, and that whiteness is the racial norm in the Netherlands. Given that whiteness is also the racial and dominant norm in the U.S., I developed Teacher Embodiment as Lived Pedagogy to specifically address the power differential of an



overrepresented white teacher population with an increasingly racially diverse student demographic. To consider the application of this framework to intercultural work, one must ask the following questions: How is racial power structured in schools? Are cultural differences between the teacher and student as salient as racial differences? Does an emphasis on cultural difference obfuscate the role of race in (in)equitable schooling? In instances when a teacher and student may have different nationalities (and/or cultures) but have the same racial background, is discrimination as salient as when teachers and students share the same race? The answers to these questions offer insight into what structures might sustain discrimination and harm to students the most. My notions of teacher embodiment seek to better align both the teacher and student's race and culture because I contend that both race and culture integrally shape a teacher's pedagogy. When there are mismatches between a teacher and student's race or culture, these differences must be understood within extant power structures in the country, and to consider how positions of power in either aspect can be a root for teachers' deficit ideologies. The call for culturally responsive and intercultural pedagogies is decades-old, and a conceptual shift in our approaches towards this work are necessary if we seek a reality beyond minimal progress.

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