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The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Era of COVID: Using Documentary Film to Tell Stories from the Front Line

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Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic forced teachers and schools to rethink everything about the educational process. They were left in their own homes to face the challenges of binary pandemics: healthcare and racial injustice, and the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy became as important as ever. This article provides a view into the lives of teachers in urban schools who relied on the tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to serve their students. Twenty-five teachers were interviewed for a documentary film and several themes emerged, including resiliency, empathy, professional respect, and social justice activism.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, COVID-19, teacher voice

Introduction

It is not hyperbole to say that 2020 was a year like no other, and we are still living in the nightmare that is COVID-19. We watched for any uplifting news from Dr. Fauci that would signal the end of the misery. Many of us refreshed the webpages of local health agencies wondering if it was finally our turn to line up for a vaccine, and teachers at all levels of the educational system sat in front of endless tiny squares of faces, trying to relay information, keep students engaged, provide security, and move their classes along in a never-ending series of Zoom sessions.

Teachers endured what can only be described as immense trauma, but their role in the fabric of our society dictates that they maintain the status quo throughout the chaos, exhibit resilience and creativity, and figure out how to make it all work for students. They do not have the time to ask how this could all happen—they have Google Classroom lessons to plan along with their own children and families to protect. For this article, the researchers focus on the stories of teachers in urban schools who continued to serve amidst the most strenuous of circumstances. Our goal is to uplift their voices while providing important context for discussions around Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, educational and social equity, policy decision-making, and racial injustice during times of immense crisis.

Research Questions:

1. What are the experiences of classroom teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do teachers view their roles during a global health crisis?
3. How do teachers view their role and the role of schools during social, political, and racial unrest?
4. What opportunities do teachers provide students to challenge their own beliefs, the beliefs of their peers, and the beliefs of their teachers with regard to the pandemic and all of the social implications?

To respond to these questions, the researchers interviewed 25 educators across the country as part of a documentary film project on the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy through a Pandemic: Listening to Teacher Stories

It is difficult to think about PK-12 teaching in 2020 and not think about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Borne out of calls for multicultural education nearly fifty years ago (Banks, 1997; Grant & Chapman, 2014), what we now consider Culturally Relevant Pedagogy started as attempts to recognize students' racial and cultural background in schools. In 1995, Banks and Banks defined equity pedagogy as "teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function effectively within and help create and perpetuate a just, human and democratic society" (p. 152). However, American schools (overall) have yet to create systems that perpetuate such a society.

The majority of US public schools are designed from a Eurocentric norm in which students are expected to comply with principles and routines that make the (primarily white) adults feel comfortable. Schools, or school systems, in which student voice is valued and shared norms are truly shared have not yet become the standard within the United States. There are, however, classrooms in which teachers strive to build authentic relationships with students and create environments where student voice is valued and empowered. Such classrooms adhere to Ladson-Billings' (1995) definition of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which "rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). In 2020, when teachers were left in their own homes to face the challenges of twin pandemics—healthcare and racial injustice—the need for culturally relevant practice became as important as ever.

Within the first tenet of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, *academic success*, all students experience high levels of success due to high expectations, high levels of support, and a responsive classroom. The tenet of academic success also includes a sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of the teacher. To fully enact academic success, teachers take responsibility for the growth and achievement of their students. They take accountability for student success through finding innovative ways to teach, differentiating to meet student needs, and persisting to help students achieve. This necessitates knowing each student as a

learner and continually monitoring their learning while designing experiences in which students can experience and celebrate success.

This academic success may look different for each student. Therefore, teachers must be able to build authentic relationships to truly know and respond to each student, to hear their voice, and use that voice to shape teaching and learning. Teachers in 2020 were challenged more than ever before in finding unique ways to build and maintain authentic relationships with students. For some this meant driving to students' homes to deliver art supplies. For others it meant spending evenings calling students on the phone just to say, "I am glad you were in class today." For still others it meant stepping out of their standard curriculum and using current events to connect with students' experiences, questions, and emotions.

The second tenet of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is *cultural competence*, "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18). In becoming a culturally competent teacher, one must be willing to engage in self-interrogation and authentic dialogue with self and others. This involves becoming aware of one's own biases and prejudices and recognizing how these biases impact interactions with others and are manifested in the classroom. Culturally competent teachers teach through the strengths of the culture of their students. For example, these teachers recognize teaching Black history through the lens of what *has been done to* Black people is in itself biased and perpetuating oppression. Instead, these teachers teach Black joy and Black triumph (Love, 2021), thus empowering their students and creating opportunities to impact our society.

In the late spring of 2020, teachers began preparing for the inevitability of virtual teaching in the fall semester. Simultaneously, the killings of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and countless others brought an increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement across the United States. The teachers in our study began thinking about how to address this second pandemic in their classrooms. They were aware students would have questions about the movement, racial justice, and the racial inequities that both COVID and BLM were exposing within US society. Teachers began preparing themselves for these inevitable discussions and ways in which their classrooms could provide a productive venue for processing the events of 2020, thus highlighting a need for teachers to practice the third tenet of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

The third tenet of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, *socio-political critical consciousness*, is often the tenet most difficult for teachers to achieve in traditional classrooms. Through socio-political critical consciousness "students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). In these classrooms, student voice is valued and used as a vehicle for teaching. Students engage in active critique and challenge a status-quo school culture and world (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These are classrooms where teachers empower students and help them see that they can influence the world in which they live; these are classrooms where teachers don't shy away from the truth that today in the United States, all voices and all lives do not matter. However, individual citizens can create change, however small. Teachers in these classrooms help students find opportunities to challenge the world in which they live and lift up their voices to make a change. COVID-19 and the social and racial unrest of 2020 necessitated that teachers respond to the heightened visibility of inequities by allowing their virtual classrooms to be places where students could discuss, process, and begin to problem-solve the very reality of life during these troubled times.

Telling Stories through Documentary Film

With all of this in mind, the researchers set out to gather the stories of teachers who were experiencing the pandemic to learn how they were coping with the monumental changes in their jobs and lives, and if we would see evidence of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as described in our research questions along the way. With the help of a documentary filmmaker, Jon Brick, we began interviewing teachers from all over the country through Zoom. We interviewed 25 teachers to illuminate their stories while revealing the heartbreak and courage of individuals simply trying to work in an educational system under siege from COVID-19. The film covers the events surrounding the initial shut-down of schools, the social and community unrest that has occurred during quarantine, the unease and uncertainty of re-opening, and ultimately, the experiences of participants navigating the return to school. Most specifically, we examine closely the work of educators who interact directly with students in diverse school settings to determine how they are navigating their new roles in this time of unending crisis.

Methodology

After developing our research questions, we identified teachers that we knew from our work in schools in the Kansas City metropolitan community to interview. Then, we placed a call through a teacher Facebook page for educators around the country to participate. We also used snowball sampling, which led to even more participants. In all, we interviewed 25 teachers, using a semi-structured protocol over a nine-month period. At the beginning of the pandemic and the initial shutdown, we asked teachers three basic questions: 1) What has teaching been like for you? 2) How has your school/district handled the pandemic? And 3) What message do you have for leaders at the local, state, and national level about what teachers do? We asked follow-up questions and recorded the sessions through the Zoom recording option. As the pandemic dragged on, we adjusted our protocol to include questions around the role of teachers during social and racial unrest, and we re-interviewed several subjects to chart their experiences as the crisis shifted with each new horrific story playing out in real time.

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the images of George Floyd being pressed to death invaded the airwaves during the summer months of 2020, along with the awful news of the shooting of Breonna Taylor and too many other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. So, specifically, we asked: 1) How do you view your role as an educator during a national crisis around racial and social injustice? 2) What is the role of the school in assisting students with deconstructing complex and politically charged ideas? 3) What avenues are available to teachers and students to share their voices about the events happening around them? 4) What are your beliefs about whether and how the pandemic caused or is a reflection of the inequities in our society?

We adhered to the tenets of qualitative research with respect to stating research questions and developing a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We followed the basic steps to complete a narrative inquiry as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), namely:

1. We selected individuals to gather stories; in our case, we were interested in collecting the stories of classroom teachers experiencing a worldwide pandemic.
2. We considered how the collection of data and their recording can take different shapes. This step requires an understanding of the researcher as a listener or a questioner, and of how the transcription of the stories can shape meaning. We recorded each interview session over Zoom, and the transcriptions were created through the Zoom platform. The researchers asked open-ended questions and allowed for a free-flowing conversation with follow-up questions. We reviewed the transcripts individually and then came together as research partners to make sure we understood the participants' meanings.
3. We embedded information about the context of the stories into the data collection. This step involves an understanding of the participants' individual experiences, racial/ethnic makeup, their culture, gender, and their historical contexts. Because we were collectively in the middle of experiencing historic events (the pandemic and the social and racial unrest), we included questions specifically about the participants' experiences with these events.
4. We embedded a collaborative approach in the collection and telling of stories. We asked participants to review the transcriptions for accuracy and sought clarification if there were any questions about meaning.
5. We analyzed the participants' stories using a process of reorganizing into a general type of framework, called restorying. In our case, we relied on a chronology of events as participants experienced each phase of the pandemic. This step also involves identifying themes that emerge from the stories. We first developed a coding scheme and then identified patterns, recurrent ideas, or language to create themes.
6. We presented the narrative report in written form (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 71-73).

We also relied on methodology related to oral history research, including a commitment to allowing interview subjects the time and space to tell their complete story (Oral History Association, 2021). We visited with all of our participants at least three times, with each interview lasting about an hour.

Findings: Stories from Teacher Participants

On the whole, the teachers we interviewed show that they will work amidst the most challenging of circumstances to meet the needs of their students. As stated earlier, we talked to a total of 25 teachers, across a wide array of racial/ethnic backgrounds, grade levels, and content areas (see Tables 1-4, below).

Table 1

Participant Grade Levels

PK-5	Middle School	High School	Total
6	7	12	25

Table 2

Participant Content Areas

Content Area	Number of Teacher Participants
English	8
History/Social Studies	8
Math	1
General Education/Elementary	6
Special Education	2
Total	**25**

For this article, we will provide the stories of four teachers who exemplify the overall themes of the project while responding directly to the research questions. These four represent the geographical scope of the study; they teach in California, Oregon, Texas, and Missouri. They include three who identify as female (Nora, Alison, and Victoria) and one who identifies as male (Sam). Pseudonyms are used for this article.

Table 3

Participant Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Teacher Participants
Black/African-American	9
Latinx	2
Asian	2
White/Caucasian	8
Native American/Indigenous	1
Multiracial	3
Prefer Not to Answer	0
Total	**25**

Table 4

Participant Gender

Gender Identity	Number of Teacher Participants
Female	14
Male	10
Non-binary	1
Prefer Not to Answer	0
Total	**25**

Nora teaches special needs students at the secondary level. Victoria teaches leadership courses at the secondary level. Sam teaches United States history at the secondary level, and Alison teaches English at the secondary level. All of their schools can be defined as urban serving, with students who live in racially diverse, metropolitan communities. All four teachers can be considered veteran teachers, with more than five years of experience in the classroom. Further, they all have master's degrees in their specialty areas.

Nora's Story

Nora responded to our Facebook call asking teachers to share their experiences with the pandemic. She had been diagnosed with several health problems prior to the pandemic and had already been teaching her students from the hospital on many occasions. She identifies as multi-racial and describes herself as "medically fragile," and worried that her special needs students in her underserved, urban school in southern California would be

unable to comply with new safety guidelines. In preparation for the start of the new school year, she outlined her many concerns:

> I will be teaching moderate to severe special education students, as that's my specialty—mostly life skills—and unfortunately, most of my students can't keep masks on all day, and their parents will get doctors' notes which will excuse them. My classroom will be a dangerous place for me to be, even though it's my favorite place in the world. I know that going into the school year is terrifying, but I've made a commitment to kids with special needs, and I'm not going to run away, afraid of COVID and not go back into the classroom because they need me. So that's where I need to be. And if I catch COVID, I'm used to the hospital anyway, so I'll deal with it.

A few months into the pandemic, we asked her to share her thoughts about the leadership at all levels of government and what message she might have for those making decisions about her work.

> I know there's a major benefit [to teaching] because you love what you do and your kids need you, but there's just so many different levels of insanity that you're dealing with and the people that are making decisions just don't have a clue. If you've never been to a public school, how do you set rules and regulations for the entire country? And we're going to see a mass shift of teachers who are going to leave before the school year starts or who are going to get so sick during the school year that they have to leave. We're being forced into an impossible situation. So, any teacher who's medically fragile? Any teacher who's pregnant? Any teacher who's older? Any teacher who's a cancer survivor like I am? We're screwed.

Nora ultimately did contract COVID-19. She spent weeks in the hospital but survived. As a Culturally Relevant teacher practicing the tenet of academic success, Nora returned to the classroom undeterred in her mission to serve her students. Although she was medically fragile, she viewed returning to the classroom and serving her special education students as her responsibility.

Sam's Story

We learned about Sam when he responded to our email blast to teachers in our community requesting participation in the project. Sam is a white high school US history teacher in the metropolitan Kansas City area. When the pandemic hit, he decided he needed to do everything possible to continue to keep students engaged while navigating an entirely new system of delivering instruction. At the start of the pandemic, he expressed the need for teachers and schools to provide some sense of security for students and for everyone to come together to deal with the crisis:

> We want to do what's best for kids, and we know that this is a time in our students' lives that they've never experienced. I went to school during 9/11. So, I know that kind of trauma, but that was just a blip. That was a few weeks. I mean, it changed the way we looked at the world, but it was only a few weeks of intensity at the beginning. I think as social studies teachers, we recognize that, and we see that this is a moment where we need to roll up our sleeves and we need to come together, and we need to do what's best for our students.

In the early days of the crisis, of course, no one knew just how long we would be suffering from all of the loss—of life and of living—and Sam worried about forging relationships with students he would never meet in person if the shut-down continued into the fall semester:

> I have about 160 kids in my classes. I know them. I have relationships with those students. What do we do with students that I've never had, where I haven't had a chance to build these relationships, so I don't know how they are as learners? We hope we're back in person in August. There is a chance that this isn't over and come August, we gotta figure out how to do that. And it's going to be—logistical wise—it could be a nightmare.

And it was a nightmare. As we all know now, the spring semester ended with missed proms and driveway graduation celebrations, and the death toll from the virus continued to

climb into the summer. And during the summer, along with all of the fears around gathering with friends and family, the country endured a reckoning with its long and ugly racial history.

Centuries of oppression and knees on the necks of too many Black people led to nationwide demonstrations after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police. And while school was not in session, students and teachers still used their connections with each other to organize and protest the injustices we all witnessed. In our project, we document these connections and the work of student organizers, who found support from their teachers to share their voices with the world. Indeed, one of Sam's students, a high school senior who identifies as a Black female, helped organize local protests. For purposes of this article, we asked our teacher participants what they believed their role to be in the processing of complex, highly charged themes around race and social justice—or if they believed they had a role at all. Further, the researchers wanted to know if conversations around the juxtaposition of the Black Lives Matter protests and the insurrection of January 6, 2021 were taking place and if and/or how teachers allowed students to deconstruct these two events.

Thus, just after the violent uprising at the US Capitol, when thousands of protesters sought to overturn the 2020 election, Sam summarized it this way:

> It's our job. I remember during our first period, I had a TV on, and we were watching the certification of the election. I told my students it would be a routine event—nothing much to see. Well, by fourth period, all hell was breaking loose at the Capitol, and we watched it in real time. You know, then we talked about what we were seeing. I try not to insert my own political beliefs into the conversation, but I try to make sure everyone feels comfortable sharing what they think. So, we talked about the Black Lives Matter movement. We talked about the insurrection on the 6th. We talk about how this pandemic hasn't been experienced in the same ways by everyone in society—you know, the inequities that are out there. They're not stupid. They see it too, so it's my job to help them analyze what they see. And what some said was that if the people that stormed the Capitol were Black, they would have all been shot. So, I had to acknowledge what they were feeling and seeing and try to make it okay for them to share.

Sam, practicing the Culturally Relevant tenet of socio-political critical consciousness, wanted to allow his students the chance to make the comparisons between the two movements. He reflected on his own struggle to maintain neutrality during these conversations but understood the need for him to do so. He expressed his frustration and dismay at what he and his students witnessed together.

Alison's Story

Alison identifies as a white female and has been a high school English teacher for seven years. She also responded to an email request for participants. When we first met with her, she was teaching in an underserved community in Oregon. At the beginning of the pandemic when schools shut down, she took it upon herself to make sure her students who were already in dire straits economically would not lose out on vital support that her school provided. Adhering to the Culturally Relevant tenet of academic success, she delivered meals to her students and did home check-ins. She stated:

> I hate to say it, but it has been traumatizing because we have such strong emotional bonds with our kids, and we see them every day. I have 194 kids on my case load, and I miss every single one of them so intensely. I actually have been just kind of trying to cope emotionally with that, so I have been reaching out to the kids and making sure that they have what they need. So, while the district was kind of in chaos, there was a program in place where families could pick up school lunches so that their kids who would normally get free lunches had the opportunities to get those. But we have families in this area that don't have access to vehicles themselves. Their kids get picked up at the bus stops, and so for a couple of weeks until the district got things together, actually I was running school lunches to kids whose families couldn't get out of the house, whether it was because they were afraid they were sick or because they had disabilities.

Alison's story is not at all unique—certainly not among the participants we interviewed. Every teacher we spoke to described performing some extra duty regarding outreach to their students: phone check-ins, meal deliveries, and drive-by classwork drop-offs.

They also believed their classrooms (even online) were the places to have difficult conversations about their worlds. We checked in with Alison just after the events of January 6, 2021 in Washington DC, and we asked her how her students were processing what they saw and whether she thought it was her place to challenge students to become critical thinkers and critical witnesses to history: "Of course!" she stated. "I don't push my thoughts onto them, but I think it's my job to help them ask questions about what they are experiencing."

Victoria's Story

Victoria identifies as a Black female and teaches leadership classes at a high school in Texas. She became a participant after learning about the project via snowball sampling—another participant recommended her to the study. We interviewed Victoria three times over the course of the project. In the early days of the pandemic, like all of our participants, she worked tirelessly to bring programs and classes online, and she created avenues for students to express their thoughts about the multiple crises that the country and world seemed to be enduring. To contextualize the events of the summer, when so many marched for police reform, Victoria supported her students forming a debate group when school started, where they talked about race and social justice and learned how to make a solid argument.

Closely following the Culturally Relevant tenets of socio-political critical consciousness and cultural competence, she moderated virtual sessions of students who discussed George Floyd's murder, police brutality, the upcoming election, and the handling of COVID-19. She said that her students "valued the opportunity to share their feelings," and that they "actually looked forward to coming to class, even though it was online." She also said that her students had not only experienced racism but were highly motivated to create better circumstances and outcomes for people who looked like them. When we asked her about the events of January 6, 2021 and how she handled them in the classroom, she stated:

> It was a Wednesday, and I wore my chucks and pearls—I support Kamala Harris. Well, I had taken a break and I turned on CNN, MSNBC, and FOX because I want to get the full story. I could not believe what I was watching. I thought I was watching *The Twilight Zone*. There's no way that this was real life in America….

When it came time to talk to her students about what they were witnessing, she stated:

> We try to teach our students what's right, period, and if the Constitution is what we follow as a country, then that's what's right, and that's what we do. We won't hold back on conversations. We won't give our own opinions, but when students get into their leadership classes, we're going to let them speak about it. This was an experience that will definitely shape their thoughts about how they move forward as leaders in this world. Some of our students said they could not believe that the leader of the free world made the United States look like a third world country where there is no law and order, when he preaches law and order. But what happened to law and order on the sixth? Who knows? Our students don't fight with each other about these issues. They argue, but they don't fight about things. We teach them to express their opinions in a respectful way. I got an email from a parent the other day saying, "You are teaching socialism!" Well, that wasn't quite right, but what we did do in class was ask students what they thought about socialism and if they thought there any good things about it. We let kids talk about it. We try to facilitate a conversation. That's our job. We're not going to just feed them information and have them only know one side of the story. That's not what we're supposed to do. As educators, we are supposed to share information with our kids and let them absorb it however they choose to and make informed decisions.

We also got a chance to observe the student-led debate club that Victoria oversees. For this article, it is simply important to note that Victoria does indeed create space for her students to talk about a range of controversial issues—never taking a definitive, political stance herself or forcing her opinion on them. She simply probed and asked thoughtful questions that compelled them to reflect on their beliefs and attempt to defend them.

Thematic Revelations

In responding to the research questions, and through an analysis of interview transcripts, we uncovered four themes that signified the life and work of urban schoolteachers during the COVID-19 catastrophe—each of these is aligned to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

1) *Resilience: Teachers will do whatever it takes to get the job done.*

We found that these teachers were willing to do absolutely anything and everything to serve their students. They saw it as their calling to make the lives of their students manageable throughout the crisis. Further, they exemplify a student-centered approach to everything they do, adjusting lessons, conducting home visits, and revising entire programs, all in an effort to put student needs first. Sam created silly home videos of himself singing Elton John's I'm Still Standing and other tunes at the start of the pandemic, just to get kids to log on—even if to laugh at him at first, then move into the day's lesson. Alison spent weeks organizing lunch deliveries to students who couldn't get to school for their free meal. And of course, Nora, who feared her special needs students would flounder without seeing her every day, taught from her hospital bed.

2) *Empathy: Teachers believe it is their job to help students adjust to chaos.*

The teachers in our study overwhelmingly believed it was their responsibility to bring a sense of normalcy to students' lives. They knew that for some students, they would be their only access to the outside world. They worried incessantly about the well-being of their students. They missed them. They loved them. And they were heartsick about the reality that too many of them were going to fall behind because of the systemic inequities that exist in education. They also believed that they needed to meet students "where they were" and be flexible about timelines and deadlines. Some of the formality of the educational process went out the window, with more focus on overall student well-being. Victoria's leadership course became an outlet for students to express their ideas about social justice and race in this country. Alison knew that a missed assignment was less important than making sure a student had enough to eat.

3) *Professional Respect: Teachers want their work valued, especially during times of crisis.*

At the beginning of the pandemic, the teachers in our study felt that the world "had their backs." They were called heroes and received accolades for their work, as parents were shocked into the new realities of homeschooling their own kids. The teachers in our study felt valued and that for the first time, everyone finally "got it" about just how hard the job is. But as the weeks turned into months and with nerves fraying about the pandemic in general,

suddenly the teachers we interviewed felt under attack from all sides. “They just want us to babysit,” Alison noted, adding, “Nobody cares if *we* die! They just want free childcare!”

All of the teachers we interviewed were dismayed to see how quickly the public “turned on them,” as Victoria stated. They felt devalued and disheartened by some of the discourse, but were still committed to their work. Nora was most vocal about this. She, being immuno-compromised but dedicated, shared her anger at those who demanded teachers get back in the classroom at all costs, and at parents who protested mask-wearing. “Don’t get me started” she said, when asked about those who refused to wear masks, get vaccinated, or social distance.

4) *Social Justice Activism: Teachers believe it is their role to help students deconstruct complex themes around race and social justice.*

At first, our participants struggled simply to maintain a sense of normalcy for their students, but as mentioned earlier, quickly adjusted to meet students’ needs. Throughout the early days and weeks of the pandemic, teachers focused on learning new technologies and just trying to do their jobs the best way they knew how. Once summer hit, and the issues around racial and social injustice came into sharp focus, they believed they had a responsibility to confront the injustice along with their students. As culturally relevant teachers, they reflected on their own biases as they continued to provide space for their students to explore difficult themes and challenge systems and ideas that are socially and racially unjust. Victoria oversaw a student-led debate club to tackle complex questions. Sam turned the television on so his students could watch the election certification on January 6th, only to have the day’s events devolve into chaos, leaving him to provide historical context, Constitutional analyses, and the space to question everything they were witnessing.

Conclusion

COVID-19 created a backdrop requiring teachers to approach teaching in new and uncharted ways out of necessity. They were forced to face the challenges of twin pandemics—healthcare and racial injustice. As a result, the teachers we interviewed engaged in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and were forever changed by the experiences they endured. Indeed, they embodied the very ideals of this pedagogy—taking responsibility for student growth and

learning, putting students first, taking the time and space for reflective practice, challenging the status quo and allowing their students to do the same. They understood and valued their students' worlds and shaped classroom experiences around what their students were seeing and feeling. Further, when we listen to teachers about the educational process, students do better and the overall system benefits. The teachers in our study are exemplary. They model best practices and care deeply about their work with students. This project sought to learn from teachers, to hear their voice and to use this voice to imagine an educational system in which Culturally Relevant Pedagogy becomes the norm and not a necessity borne out of a pandemic.

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Jennifer Waddell, PhD (she/her) currently serves as the Director of the Institute for Urban Education (IUE) and Sprint Foundation Endowed Professor of Urban Education at the University of Missouri Kansas City. IUE's mission is to recruit, prepare and support teachers for Kansas City area schools. Dr. Waddell also serves as division co-chair for the Teacher Education & Curriculum Studies division in which her primary focus is initial certification programs. Within her leadership roles, Dr. Waddell works collaboratively with Kansas City partner school districts and the community to prepare educators who are committed to social justice and educational equity. Her research, interests and related projects focus on teacher preparation, urban education, teacher leadership, and social justice in education with a focus on preparing and supporting teachers for historically underserved communities.