

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Elementary Immigrant Students**

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### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Elementary Immigrant Students**

Culturally relevant pedagogy is an educational theory that stresses the importance of recognizing and valuing each student for their own personal culture and life experience. It encourages academic achievement while also fostering students' cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This paper will be an examination of the research on culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy and elementary immigrant students.

#### **Context**

I am a dual language teacher at a school with a large percentage of immigrant students or children of immigrants. In the last five to ten years, there has been an influx of immigrants within our local community. The demographic of my local school district as a whole has changed rapidly and drastically. About half of my class is comprised of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In Washington state there were approximately 1.21 million immigrants in 2023, which accounts for approximately 15.5% of population (Camarota, 2019). Within the context of the United States, Washington state is considered an immigrant friendly state, in that its policies are often more supportive of immigrants than in other states. Nationally, there are approximately 47.8 million immigrants in the United States, which is roughly 14.3% of the population. There is a growing negative attitude and rhetoric toward immigrant communities and families within the United States. These negative perceptions have been exacerbated during the 2024 presidential campaign. Specific immigrant populations were targeted, and their safety compromised for simply existing as an immigrant within the United States. Security and services for immigrant families are threatened with the new conservative administration. An English only assimilation and 'us and against' them attitude threaten the success of immigrant students in US schools. Cuts to the department of education, along with federal funding toward public schools will have a

negative effect on all children, but especially on immigrant students who were already farther from educational justice than their peers who share the dominant culture and language.

### **Importance**

As a first-grade dual language teacher, my classroom population consists of over 50% immigrant students or children of immigrants. I feel responsible for providing them with the most effective practices to ensure their academic and social and emotional success. Much of the provided curriculum innately excludes many students from engagement and understanding due to different funds of knowledge or lack of Eurocentric US background knowledge. It is harder to attain a connection between home and school when the content of the classroom has no relation to the culture or reality of student homelife or culture. With the growing immigrant population of my community's school district and low graduation rates based on state standards, especially for multilingual learners (MLL) students, including culturally responsive practices could have a positive effect on the district as a whole.

### **Purpose**

My purpose in this project is to improve my understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and its application so that I can apply it within my classroom and be a resource for other teachers in my community who would like to do the same. The end goal is to be able to help my students reach grade level state standards while maintaining a healthy sense of self.

### **Focal Questions**

To guide my research on culturally responsive pedagogy and immigrant students, I used the following focal questions.

- a. According to the research, how broadly is CRP implemented in US schools?
- b. According to the research, what is the SEL impact of CRP on immigrant students?

- c. According to the research, what is the academic impact of CRP on immigrant students?

### **Literature Review**

In this literature review, I examine the extensive research on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and its relationship with elementary aged immigrant students. In the literature surrounding this topic, there are three themes that have consistently presented themselves. The first is that the terminology regarding the subject varies and is often misused or over generalized. This has led to complications when it comes to appropriate implementation and collection of data. The second theme is that there are two important pillars when it comes to effective culturally responsive pedagogy for immigrant students. They are teacher buy-in and attitude, and support from leadership. The last theme that has presented itself in the literature is the importance of learning the holistic cultural context of each student in order to be truly culturally responsive. In this literature review I will discuss what the current research says on each of these themes.

#### **Ambiguity in Terminology**

The terminology surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy is vast, loosely defined and often conflated. There are many terms that are grouped under the umbrella of culturally relevant pedagogy including culturally sustaining pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally diverse teaching, multicultural education and the list goes on. These terms are often used interchangeably for the same thing or applied loosely to many concepts.

The ambiguity of terminology that exists within the research has led to an unfortunate lack of quantifiable data. Franco et. al (2023) referred to this ambiguity and its

implications in “Assessing Teachers' Culturally Responsive Classroom Practice in PK-12 Schools: A Systematic Review of Teacher-, Student-, and Observer-Report Measures”, stating, “A persistent challenge for the field is the definitional and conceptual issues surrounding CRP” (p. 2). The article was a systematic review of the quantifiable research of CRP and aimed to document how these practices are used and measured within the classroom. The authors noted that the variations of the concept of CRP are many, especially in recent years when more and more attention has been called toward equitable and racially just teaching practices and their importance. The broad definition and over extension of these terms has led to a lack of quantifiable data and evidence of success in relation to culturally relevant pedagogy. Within the classroom, culturally relevant interactions can be both culturally specific and generic, which can make it difficult to identify or analyze. The authors stated that “A necessary next step to move the field forward is to build upon the existing literature syntheses that exist through comparative and critical analysis of CRP measurement constructs” (p. 4). These scholars related this lack of analysis on the subject of culturally relevant pedagogy to the overextension and lack of specificity in definition and function.

Some researchers have made the effort to differentiate and better define the terminology. In their synthesis on the research surrounding the topic of CRP, Aronson and Laughter (2015) identify a distinction between *culturally relevant teaching* and *culturally relevant pedagogy*. “*teaching* affects competence and practice whereas *pedagogy* affects attitude and disposition” (p. 167, emphasis original). The authors draw similarities and, helpfully, distinctions between the two terms. The distinctions are as follows; The former, *culturally relevant teaching*, derives from the research of Geneva Gay and refers to the

practice of cultural relevance within the classroom. Gay's research puts a greater emphasis on teacher responsibility. The latter, *culturally relevant pedagogy* comes from the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings and refers to cultural relevance in a broader more ideological sense, focusing more on collective empowerment than individual success (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). This term, *culturally relevant pedagogy*, came from Ladson-Billings's (2005) observation that even though curriculum, textbooks and other content tools have evolved to include a more multicultural lens since the 1950s, marginalized students were still struggling. Ladson-Billings concluded that the materials were not having an impact on practice and thus presented the theory of *culturally relevant pedagogy*. The term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* was added to the conversation as an alternative to Ladson-Billings term and theory in 2012 by Django Paris. Paris argues that the term "...require(s) that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p.95). This articulates that educators should not only be striving to use student home culture as a means for meaningful engagement within the classroom, but also fostering and imparting the importance of sustaining and valuing the home culture in the face of dominant culture and assimilation. Ladson-Billings (2014) herself reflects on the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as a more current and accurate term. In her essay, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: aka the Remix", she calls for the need to "name and define *culturally sustaining pedagogy*" (p. 9) and that the work "will need to be a vigilant and steadfast project that guards against the degradation of the meaning and implementation of the term" (p. 9). Though Ladson-Billings is in agreement that the term and theory of her original *culturally relevant pedagogy*, must be ever evolving to suit the needs of a changing world and

advancements in our understandings, she is adamant that new terms be clear in both definition and practice in order to avoid the “distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted to promulgate.” (p. 9). In order for teachers to appropriately and effectively implement CRP within their classroom, scholars like Ladson-Billings and others are requesting clarity with the surrounding terminology and theory.

In the article “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education and Student Engagement: A Call to Integrate Two Fields for Educational Change,” Stein et. al (2024) offer a potential solution to the challenges presented to implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy by the conflation of the terminology within the field. The article takes a look at research from both cultural relevancy and student engagement fields and pushes for the two to be used together for effective implementation. Their argument is that incorporating research on student engagement into professional learning of cultural relevancy within the classroom will help to mitigate some of the confusion and misinformation by drawing attention to how and why CRP practices engage students in a more meaningful way.

### **The Pillars of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Classrooms**

Although the terminology has been shown to lack specificity within the research, there is consistency among scholars in the identification of two guiding principles that lead to effective implementation within the classroom. Teacher attitude and support from administration are two pillars of culturally relevant pedagogy that appear throughout the current research as important guides for implementation of the theory in order to support immigrant students.

In one case study of culturally relevant pedagogy in action, both of these pillars

present themselves (Zhang-Wu, 2017). The teacher in question, Ms. B, teaches elementary school to a class of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. The researcher lists a few qualities that helped Ms. B to implement CRP within the classroom. The first was her ethic of caring when interacting with students. The next, her sensitivity to inequity which meant that she was consistently recognizing ways in which she was able to bridge gaps of inequity within the classroom. One example described how she prioritized the use of technology within the classroom so that her students that did not have access to parental guidance in technology use at home, were able to learn how to use technology responsibly and effectively under her guidance. Zhang-Wu also points out that Ms. B's success in implementation was supported by her principal's knowledge and commitment to CRP within the school as well as having access to biweekly professional development provided to teachers on the theory and practice of culturally relevant pedagogy. This is an example of how support from administration is critical when it comes to classroom implementation of CRP. In the following sub sections, I will be discussing research that looks at each of these pillars individually.

### ***Teacher Attitudes***

Effective culturally responsive teaching (CRT) requires teachers to branch out beyond boxed curriculum. Teachers who are implementing CRT have a responsibility to learn and understand the cultural context of each of the students in their classroom. They must be capable of introspection, of identifying unconscious bias and of committing to evolve and learn. They will have to adjust plans and curriculum yearly based on the cultural context of each class of students. The teacher's attitude is a driving force when it comes to CRP implementation.

In a study examining the impact of color-blind racial attitudes of teachers using a survey of 323 preservice teachers in an alternative teacher prep program, Cadena et. al (2021) found that there was a significant negative association between color blind racial attitudes and teaching outcome expectations with immigrants. This provides more evidence that the attitudes of the teacher are critical in order to successfully support culturally and linguistically diverse students. If teachers are not able to conceptualize the theory and are still operating under deficit-based thinking models, they will have less success with culturally relevant pedagogy implementation in the classroom.

Another study that examined four teacher candidates, three white and one African American, placed in an urban title 1 school, stressed the importance of teacher attitude (Laman et. al, 2018). The teacher candidates participated in a language arts course which required them to hold writing conferences with second graders at the school. The students were participating in a culturally responsive writing activity that required each of them to write a story about their own hair. The author noted that some of the teacher candidates were coming in with a deficit mindset in regard to the students, but their perspectives evolved after working one on one with students. They were able to identify their initial bias and assumption and shift their attitude towards the students, leading to them creating meaningful connections with students and supporting their true potential. By participating in this experience as a teacher candidate, their future students will benefit from their more open and culturally sustaining attitudes.

Teachers implementing CRP must also present a willingness to find appropriate and relevant texts for the students within their classroom. In an article examining picture books relevant to migrant workers and their families, researchers Stevenson and Beck (2021)

conducted a semi structured focus group consisting of 25 Mexican-heritage current or former migrant workers. The authors stated, “We believe that educators looking to assess a set of books about lives outside their experience need to seek the perspectives of readers who have ‘walked the walk’ to enrich and balance scholarly approaches.” (p. 9). A teacher’s willingness to do the leg work of finding and vetting culturally responsive texts will determine whether their students can identify with the chosen texts in a meaningful way.

Incorporating, engaging and valuing family engagement is another important aspect of culturally sustaining pedagogy that hinges on the teacher’s attitude. It is up to teachers to establish a positive and productive home-school connection. In the article, “Teacher-Family Solidarity as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Practice”, authors Hong et al. (2025) explore the home-school connection. The article is based on a qualitative study exploring the journeys of five teachers in urban areas and their interactions with students’ families. The methodology of the larger study was a portraiture in order to explore the positives of teacher and family relationships, along with the challenges of deficit-oriented views. Authors Hong et. al note “In the same ways that teachers seek to cultivate a climate of caring in the classroom-through listening, empathic consideration, and thoughtful dialogue-they can design caring interactions with families” (p. 94). Creating meaningful family connections is another responsibility that falls on the teacher within a culturally sustained classroom. At the core of CRP is the disruption of traditional power dynamics. Teachers, as a representation of the education system must do the work in reaching out to historically marginalized families by creating a space where they feel valued as an equal stakeholder. Hong et al. also state that increased interactions alone will not be enough to build trust with families and that “the impact of deficit views can be persistent and require strategic efforts to develop the

capacities of teachers and families” (p. 94). Teachers that are engaging with families without examining their unconscious bias and deficit attitudes towards culturally and linguistically diverse students will not only be unsuccessful in building trust with families but may also confirm for families and students the feeling that they do not belong.

The confidence that teachers have in their abilities is another aspect of teachers’ attitudes that impact CRP implementation. Ialuna et. al (2024) conducted a study on the effects of teacher self-efficacy in CRT on the outcomes of immigrant student learning. The study consisted of 47 fourth grade classrooms within 25 different schools in an area comprised of 38% first generation immigrants. The study was a multi-level analysis using data extracted from questionnaires given to both students and teachers participating in the study. The results of the study found that the more confidence the teachers had in their ability to appropriately implement CRT within the classroom, the higher the outcomes of student learning for both immigrant and non-immigrant students. When teachers are accepting and understanding of the work that goes into adopting the theory of CRP, they are able to have a higher impact on student outcome. The asset-based attitude that culturally relevant pedagogy requires allows teachers to implement CRP in the classroom with integrity.

The weight of equitable, culturally relevant learning often falls on the shoulders of classroom teachers. Teachers that have confidence in their abilities, perform better in practice. Since a teacher’s willingness to engage in CRP is so critical for its success within the classroom, how are preservice and in-service teachers being adequately prepared to do so? In the article, “Content and Language Integration: Pre-Service Teachers’ Culturally Sustaining Social Studies Units for Emergent Bilinguals”, author Son (2024) calls for

teacher preparation programs to emphasize the importance of culturally sustaining practices and provide future teachers and educators with the tools and confidence needed to impactfully implement such strategies within the classroom. The study examined 92 preservice teachers and their creation of culturally sustaining social studies units. The program had provided students with an understanding of the importance of CRP, along with strategies for implementing. The study revealed that 95% of the unit plans created during this class incorporated culturally sustaining practices. Teachers that are committed to CRP and have the requisite knowledge and skills will implement more effectively within the classroom.

Additionally, Fabienne Doucet (2017) offers a framework of culturally sustaining practices that can help teachers and teacher educators in their implementation. In the article “What Does A Culturally Sustaining Learning Climate Look Like?” Doucet outlines six commitments that will help teachers to implement CSP within the classroom. The commitments are: 1) *Increase knowledge about diversity*, 2) *Build the classroom as a community of trust*, 3) *Involve families and communities*, 4) *Combat prejudice and discrimination*, 5) *Address diversity in its full complexity*, and 6) *Promote global perspectives*. The author explains that culturally sustaining classrooms, which are most supportive for immigrant students, require teachers who are “fully present, genuine, and engaged.” (p. 198), but also offers that teacher education programs and school administration hold a responsibility to educate teachers on culturally relevant practices within the classroom. Background knowledge and familiarity with the ideology and strategies can equip a teacher with the attitude required for effective classroom implementation. In another article examining teacher preparation programs, author Sharkey

(2018) notes that teachers are becoming de facto language teachers due to the changing landscape of the United States, whether or not their intention was to teach a second language. She identifies a need for preservice teacher education to have more of a culturally and linguistically sustaining lens, in order for teachers to be adequately prepared for the population of students of the current US landscape.

The importance of preservice teacher educators practicing culturally sustaining practices comes up in the research again in the article, “Practice What You Preach; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy During Covid-19” (Smith, 2020) the author sheds light on the lack of CRP she witnesses in her job as a teacher educator at California State University, Long Beach. The article calls on educators of preservice teachers to actually employ culturally relevant practices in their own teaching practices in order to explicitly demonstrate CRP and better prepare the next generation of teachers do so as well. Teacher attitude and practices are molded during preservice programs, giving teacher educators an opportunity to educate and, more importantly, model culturally relevant practices for the next generation of classroom teachers.

### ***Support from Leadership***

Principal and district support are crucial for successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Fostering community and family buy in, providing teacher training and support, and holding high academic expectations are all things that will directly support culturally relevant practices within the classroom.

In “The Role of Culturally Responsive Social and Emotional Learning in Supporting Refugee Inclusion and Belonging: A Thematic Analysis of Service Provider Perspectives” (Bennouna et al, 2021), the authors provide examples of culturally responsive

approaches that help to support refugee students school-wide, or systematically. These examples come from areas with high numbers of refugee students from the Middle East and were provided in response to specific challenges that these refugees face. The district provided prayer rooms for students, halal food in the cafeteria, and professional development system wide of culturally responsive practices. These are ways in which leadership was able to support the implementation of CRP practices school and district wide.

Additionally, DeMatthews et. al (2020), conducted another case study examining one administrator's leadership between 2014 and 2016 in a town on the border of Mexico. The authors described a common challenge that principals face when attempting to implement culturally sustainable practices in their schools. Speaking of the principal they state, "She noted how the district placed pressure on her to increase student achievement but did not provide the resources to address some of the key barriers to student achievement" (p. 381). This particular principal is committed to culturally responsive practices within her school. She acknowledges and addresses that there are critical inequities that many of the students at her school face that may be barriers to academic achievement. The district however, not having the same lens or providing support to help fill the gaps of inequity, puts more pressure on the principal to achieve rigorous academic goals without acknowledgement or support of the varying cultural backgrounds and experiences of students. Creating and implementing culturally responsive practices takes time and resources. Without support from principals, teachers will struggle to create culturally sustaining classrooms. Furthermore, without support on a district level, principals will struggle to support their teachers in creating culturally sustaining schools.

The challenges of resistance or opposition from a district level is also described in the article “Examining the Foundations of Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining School Leadership: Towards a Democratic Project of Schooling in Dual Language Bilingual Education”. In this case study on two principals employing culturally sustaining practices at two dual language schools in Utah, Leu Bonnano (2023) described it as merely a glimpse of culturally and linguistically sustaining leadership at work. She noted that though the two principals were advocates for culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, they were not able to fully implement due to the context of the educational system of Utah, which is run with ideologies that do not support the advancement of social justice. The intentions of school leadership fell short due to lack of support at the district level.

In another case study that examined the leadership practices in an alternative school, also on the border of Texas and Mexico authors Crawford et. al (2022) focused on one principal and 6 other leaders within the school. The study provided some examples of how leadership is able to support an environment of cultural sustainability and relevance for immigrant students at the school.

The practice of PAS school leaders to raise critical consciousness about district policies and practices to translating school materials in another language for students and families, enhancing community access to networks for food and medical services, conducting home visits and obtaining non-profit resources served as lifelines for their immigrant families and students. Leadership preparation programs can help school leaders and personnel must prepare to negotiate, integrate, and transverse the sociocultural, socioeconomic, ethnic/racial, and language intersections found in their school spaces to best serve children who come from newly arrived

immigrant families and undocumented families. (p. 593)

The practices stated above are ways that leadership within schools can help support the specific families and communities within the school population. This kind of support that wraps around the family will allow for immigrant students to focus more intentionally on their school experience. The quote above also emphasizes the importance of school leadership's role in connecting, engaging and, most critically, supporting immigrant student's families.

Support from leadership is also important in effective CRP implementation when it comes to program design and structure. In a study examining a two-way dual language immersion program in a title 1 K-8 school in the northeastern United States, researchers looked closely at the relationship between sense of identity, belonging, language practices and rationalism (Di Stefano et. al, 2018). The classroom in question was a 50-50 model in which the students switched weekly between an English classroom and a Spanish classroom. The authors of this article argue that while CLD students that are enrolled in DLI programs are likely to have more academic success than if not, this success is connected to the way in which the program is organized. Having the two languages so separate reinforces deficit thinking when it comes to language identity. Authors state that "...it represents a contradiction of many students' personal experiences, where languages are bridged in the same context. The use of many languages in the same classroom is seen as problematic instead of being considered a resource that can be systemically used through translanguaging strategies and the development of third spaces" (p. 15). This offers another perspective on the importance of leadership in that the organization and structures themselves need to be culturally relevant in order for the classrooms to be able to effectively implement culturally relevant practices.

Teachers working within a structure that is not culturally sustaining will inevitably fall short in efforts to create a culturally relevant environment.

Support from leadership on a legislative level also has an impact on the implementation of culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy. In the article “Disrupting the Status Quo: Exploring Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies for Young Diverse Learners” Wynter-Hoyte et. al (2019) examine four different qualitative studies examining young diverse populations, with the lens of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. One such study examines the challenges presented under English only legislation. The teacher in question wants to support her linguistically diverse students by encouraging the use of their home language in a class with majority emergent bilinguals. However, due to the English only policies applied to the schools in the area, they are required to do all of the reading and writing in English, which hinders the learning of the multilingual learners. It requires them to conform to the dominant language while at school, reinforcing the idea that their home language and the culture tied to it does not hold the same value as the dominant language and culture (Khote & Tian, 2019). This is an example of how lack of support and, in this case, active policy toward different ideology can make it nearly impossible to effectively and holistically implement CRP within the classroom.

The above research shows that it is important for effective CRP that district leadership is on board and involved in the implementation. However, in her article, “Disciplining Dalmar: A Demand to Uncover Racism and Racialization in Pursuit of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy”, Ann Mason (2016) specifies that the execution and diligence of the implementation on a district level is paramount. The article examines the experience of a school district that made big moves toward CRP on a systemic level by bussing students

between zones in order to create more racial and socioeconomic diversity across the district. Mason observed that the district was focusing on the achievement gap and intervening in ways that were not culturally responsive to CLD students. Their interventions were an attempt to change the student to meet the expectation of dominant middle-class culture and did not attempt to meet the students where they were or encourage a healthy sense of self. This is an example of the responsibility that falls on leadership attempting to implement CRP. If the systems are not flexible or culturally responsive, then the teacher is unable to create a truly culturally responsive environment within those structures.

### **Contextual Cultural Understanding**

Within the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, an understanding of the cultural and linguistic contexts of each student is paramount. According to Geneva Gay (2015), “Culture influences how and what children learn both in and out of school. As well as how and what teachers teach” (p. 128). Students that come from similar cultural backgrounds can have vastly different life experiences or current contexts. A teacher’s implicit bias or assumed knowledge of culture can lead to a student’s culture being stereotyped or inaccurately represented within the content or interpersonal interactions. When it comes to immigrant and refugee students specifically, knowledge of the educational system and pacing of a student’s, or their family’s home country helps teachers to understand and support CLD students.

In “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for African Immigrant Children in U.S. P-12 Schools”, Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) provide an example of the importance of viewing the whole child. The article examines the experience of African immigrant students and how US stereotypes of African culture in media leads to a misunderstanding and over generalization of African culture, which is actually incredibly diverse.

To practice culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers have to grow their knowledge base with authentic information about their students' cultures and educational backgrounds, without which, there is a high probability of sub-consciously indulging in stereotypical information to inform instruction and decisions that affect ethnically different students. (p. 75)

Teachers have a responsibility to attempt to understand not only student culture, but also the stereotypes that surround the culture within American society, in order to ensure that their perspectives are informed by authentic knowledge and not by their implicit bias. The authors also point out that a comprehensive understanding of a student goes beyond understanding the cultural customs. Understanding the education systems and pacing within the home country along with understanding the educational values of the family will give teachers a more thorough understanding of the attitudes and expectations that the student is experiencing at home. In another article, "It's Like They Don't Recognize What I Bring to the Classroom': African Immigrant Youths Multilingual and Multicultural Navigation in The United States" Kiramba et. al (2023) found that teachers had exceptionally low expectations when it came to African immigrant students. In one student's account she was even placed in a special education class and then transferred out when teachers realized she was not being challenged. In this case, the teacher's deficit thinking and ignorance of educational culture of the student led to the student receiving an inappropriate placement. In order to be culturally responsive and equitable, this teacher would have had to do research into the educational culture and system that the student is coming from. This would help to eliminate deficit thinking about students and families whose educational values or customs differ from that of dominant American culture.

In keeping with Kiramba's article, having a comprehensive understanding of the specific cultural and life experience of each child helps to combat inaccurate labels or diagnosis in immigrant students. In "Culturally Responsive Teaching for Children from Low-Income, Immigrant Families", Yuan and Jiang (2018) provide another specific example of the importance of learning about the individual experience of each student to help promote academic engagement. In the case study, detailing the experience of a young MLL student who recently emigrated to the United States, the student was being considered nonverbal and was going to be referred for an individualized education plan that included speech services. When the intervention specialist entered the situation, and learned more about the students' individual experience, they found that the student actually spoke two languages and was learning English as a third language. After a visit to the home of the student, the interventionist decided to use a toy giraffe that the student brought from her home country to help make connections between the student's immigration experience and her current classroom environment. The student that originally would not participate in the classroom activities, now felt comfortable and more willing to follow instruction and participate. By engaging with the student's family and greater cultural context the researcher was able to find a way to engage that specific student in a way that was meaningful to her and avoided mislabeling. In another qualitative study examining an early education teacher in the South Bronx, a newcomer immigrant student from Guyana had been mislabeled as needing special education services. When the student was transferred into a new teacher's class, she realized that what had been interpreted as a speech delay was actually the student speaking in his home language of Creole. His hesitance to participate was not because he was unable, but because he was still trying to make sense of his new

cultural and linguistic surroundings (McDevitt, 2024). Having a more extensive knowledge of both the cultural and linguistic context of these particular students had a determinative effect on their futures as students in the United States.

Contextual cultural understanding extends to family culture as well. In the article, “Our Legends and Journey Stories: Exploring Culturally Sustaining Family Engagement in Classrooms”, authors Flores and Springer (2021) take a qualitative look into culturally responsive practices of engaging parents in student literacy. They examined an elementary school near the downtown of a large city in Texas. The school was comprised of mostly Hispanic/Latinx and economically disadvantaged students. “The first step in engaging students’ families in their child’s literacy learning is to understand the complexities of their lives.” (p. 318). The authors emphasize the importance of understanding that families do not all fall within the same work/life structure that dominant, middle class society adheres to. Many parents work in the evening and are unable to attend school function due to having to work to provide for their families. Understanding the context of the family, allows for teachers to work with families, their schedules, and their capacities in order to effectively engage all families in their students’ learning.

The cultural context of each student has been an important part of culturally responsive pedagogy since early in the development of the theory. Geneva Gay (2015) references the importance of culture and understanding in the following quote:

Almost all that is done in the traditional educational enterprise exemplifies this single-group dominance. Yet, students from different ethnic groups bring their cultural heritages and socializations to school with them. These cultural orientations act as “filters” through which school content protocols, and practices are interpreted

and converted to personal meaningfulness. Problems arise when the cultures of students and schools are inconsistent, and diverse students are put in a quandary of having to try to suspend, deny, or transcend their own cultural orientations to function in the school culture that many do not even understand. Culturally responsive teaching says that this is unfair and un-doable. (p. 128)

In order to be culturally relevant in content and practice, both need to be malleable. Things should change based on which students are in the room and what the educator has learned about their culture and family life. Each facet of culture acts as one of the aforementioned filters for students. Understanding the ways in which students perceive their surroundings allows for educators to offer more points of entry for their students within the content and classroom culture.

### **Summary**

There is a lot of research that proves that culturally relevant pedagogy has a positive impact on immigrant students. However, according to the research presented, it is important that more work is done in the field to specify terminology in order to better allow scholars to understand the research. It also seems prudent that those who wish to use culturally relevant pedagogy within their classrooms to help support their students are doing so with fidelity. Scholars have identified that the attitudes of teachers, along with support from leadership are two critical pillars when it comes to effective implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Cultural understanding is another recurrent theme among the research. To be culturally relevant is to be willing to learn and understand each student as an individual, avoid and combat stereotypes, and be willing to change plans and practices to best suit the students present. In the next section I will discuss an action plan related to the

ambiguity of terminology, the two pillars of CRP implementation, and the importance of cultural context to creating a culturally relevant environment.

### **Action Plan**

In the ever-changing cultural environment within the United States, the landscape of education has changed along with it. Culturally relevant pedagogy offers a way to ensure that all students have fair access to their education by ensuring that their culturally and linguistic diversities are valued and included within their classrooms. Throughout my examination of the research surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy and immigrant elementary students there were three themes that presented themselves over and over: the ambiguity of terminology, the specific pillars of CRP implementation, and the importance of contextual cultural understanding. In the tables that follow, I will address first what the research says in regard to each theme, second, what I notice happening within my site, and third, my professional recommendations related to each particular challenge presented. The first column of the table refers to findings from my research. The second column refers to what I witness in practice within my site. The third column is my recommendation of what should be done.

The site that I am examining is a dual language elementary school with about 500 students, about 40 percent of which are multilingual learners, located within a small school district near the Puget Sound. The district has had an influx in immigrants coming from Guatemala in recent years and the demographics of the district are evolving quickly. The Spanish-English dual language program was one attempt made by the district to better and more effectively reach these immigrant students. Many students in the district speak an indigenous Mayan language at home, but also speak and understand Spanish as their second language and are learning English as a third language. The teachers in this site are met with the unique

challenge of understanding and incorporating the complicated experiences and cultural contexts of these multilingual learners within the context of a program designed for native Spanish speakers.

### **Terminology**

One recurring theme within the research on culturally relevant pedagogy is that the terminology is vast and often used inappropriately, causing misconceptions and inappropriate implementation. There is a lot of overlapping and ambiguous names around multicultural pedagogy, such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally diverse teaching, multicultural education etc. In table 1 I detail my recommendation based on the research and my personal observations. (This table has only one row because research was unanimous on the fact that the ambiguity of the terminology is a challenge and I therefore have one recommendation.)

**Table 1**

*The Ambiguity of the Terminology*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
Terminology surrounding the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is unclear and often ambiguous (Franco et. al, 2023; Paris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014)	Teachers often have a vague idea of what CRP is and either think they are being culturally relevant without appropriate implementation or are not applying the theory correctly within the classroom due to misnomers and conflated terminology.	I recommend that the educational theory community do more work on the clarity of each term related to CRP. This clarity in the terminology will be helpful for those attempting to apply the theory to their classroom as well as to those training the future teaching workforce. Schools and teachers that are interested in CRP should pay close attention to the terminology

		they use in their descriptions of practice.
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**Teacher Attitudes**

The attitude of the classroom teacher is one of the two pillars that I identified as important for implementation of CRP. The research indicates that teacher self-efficacy, asset-based mindsets, and a willingness to reflect and grow are all things that help teachers to effectively implement CRP. Table 2 describes the findings from my research related to the attitudes of teachers and my recommendations surrounding the subject.

**Table 2**

*Teacher Attitudes*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
Teachers with more confidence in their abilities surrounding CRP will have a greater impact on student learning (Ialuna et. al, 2024; Laman et. al 2018; Son, 2024)	Teachers are not implementing CRP within the classroom with consistency due to a lack in confidence in the practice. In my school, there are teachers that in theory would like to be culturally relevant but lack the knowledge and confidence to do so.	I recommend that schools that are dedicated to CRP offer mandatory and continuing professional development around CRP to ensure that teachers are confident in their abilities.
Teachers with deficit mindsets in regard to certain students have a negative impact on student learning (Cadena et. al 2021; Laman et. al 2018, Doucet, 2017).	In my school, teachers often operate using deficit mindsets without being cognizant of doing so. I have observed examples of MLL students being inappropriately referred for SPED services or written up for behavioral concerns that might have to do with whether or not they are understanding the language of	I recommend that schools provide mandatory professional development surrounding deficit-based thinking and its relationship to student success.

	instruction.	
Teacher attitudes and efforts have an impact on a positive family and school connection. (Hong et. al, 2025; Doucet, 2017; Bennouna, 2021)	Of the teachers in my school many are not making a positive family and school connection. They report feeling nervous or unsure of how to interact with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families.	I recommend that school leadership encourage and support teachers in creating a positive family and school connections, by providing translating services and holding teachers accountable to connect with families regularly in a positive context.

**Support from Leadership**

Support from leadership was the second of the two pillars identified for effective CRP implementation. Efforts from teachers to implement CRP within their classroom if the school administration is not supportive of the practices. Schools that are trying to implement CRP systematically will not be able to do so effectively without the support of the district administration. Table 3 provides my recommendations regarding leadership influence and support based on my research.

**Table 3**

*Support from Leadership*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
Implementation by leadership of CRP schoolwide has a positive impact on classroom implementation (Benounna, 2021; DeMatthews, 2020; Crawford, 2022).	There is not an expectation from leadership that CRP implementation happens schoolwide. Therefore, implementation is inconsistent. Students may feel like a valued part of their classroom community but not necessarily their school community.	I recommend that school administration implement CRP practices systematically schoolwide. In order to create a more equitable experience for students both within the classroom and in the greater school community.

<p>In districts where local legislation does not support culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, teachers will struggle in implementing CRP practices holistically. (Dematthews, 2020; Leu Bonnano 2023, Wynter-Hoyt et al, 2019)</p>	<p>Though English only legislation is not applicable to my site, English only ideologies possessed by staff are communicated in subtle but meaningful ways to students. e.g., school communication in only English, saying things like “they can’t succeed without English” taking value away from their home language.</p>	<p>I recommend that school administration provide background knowledge on the history of bilingual education in the United States and the context and importance it holds for the families of our community, along with training</p>
<p>Schoolwide implementation of CRP requires support from district administration in the form of resources, and appropriate educated guidance (DeMatthews, 2020; Crawford, 2022; DiStefano et. al, 2018)</p>	<p>Teachers in my site attempting to apply CRP to their classroom have to negotiate with expected district wide curriculum. CLD supportive programs like dual language are often scrambling for relevant texts or resources in the language of instruction.</p>	<p>I recommend that district administration create a taskforce to ensure that materials are culturally relevant and aligned with state standards. Committees could also provide support in finding and providing such materials to teachers.</p>

**Contextual Cultural Understanding**

Contextual cultural understanding is an important and often underutilized component of culturally relevant pedagogy. In order for teachers to ensure that each student feels valued and seen as their true culturally and linguistically diverse selves, a deep look into individual culture and context is required. Table 4 outlines findings from the research regarding contextual cultural understand and includes my observations and recommendations.

**Table 4**

*Contextual Cultural Understanding*

<p><b>Research</b></p>	<p><b>Practice</b></p>	<p><b>Recommendations</b></p>
<p>Effectively implementing</p>	<p>Teachers don’t always do the</p>	<p>I recommend that teachers</p>

CRP requires a comprehensive understanding of a students' home culture and personal history (Gay 2015; Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017; Yuan & Jiang, 2018).	work to research and learn about each student, so are attempting to implement culturally relevant practices without fully understanding their student's cultural contexts.	employ practices like parent teacher conferences, home visits, family nights etc. in order to learn more from the families of the students about their holistic identity.
Stereotypes from media representation of marginalized groups complicate efforts to implement effective CRP (Ndemanu, 2015; Jordan, 2017; Mason, 2016)	Teachers apply stereotypes to students based on media portrayals that are not accurate to their lived experience and end up perpetuating stereotypes and misunderstanding their students.	I recommend that teachers be provided with professional development surrounding the importance of researching and understanding the specific cultural context of their students, and of the harm that can be caused by overgeneralizing using stereotypes.
A lack of cultural context and understanding can lead to students being misdiagnosed and mis labelled as having a learning disability (Yuan & Jiang, 2018; McDevitt, 2024; Kiramba, 2023)	Teachers are referring students for SPED without first having a comprehensive understanding of the student's home cultural context.	I recommend that principals require teachers to meet with students who are struggling behaviorally or academically specifically to gain more knowledge about their cultural context in order to be better able to serve said student.

## Summary

The above tables outline what the research surrounding culturally responsive pedagogies says in relation to the themes of ambiguous terminology, attitudes of teachers, support from leadership and contextual cultural understanding. I have provided my observations from my experience teaching in a dual language first grade classroom along with my recommendations on where to go from here. Within my site there are many educators implementing culturally relevant practices within their classrooms, though the challenges persist. Without wrap around support it

is difficult to ensure a holistically culturally relevant experience for all students. In the following sections I will discuss my opinions of culturally relevant pedagogy and its position in the larger context of the United States education system.

### **Discussion**

In this literature review I have done a comprehensive examination of the research on culturally relevant pedagogy and immigrant students. Amongst the research collected, the three main themes that I identified were the ambiguity in terminology surrounding the theme; the two main pillars for implementation, namely teacher attitudes, and support from leadership; and the importance of a students' cultural context.

### **Findings**

Before starting my research, I posed three questions to help in my search. They were: according to research (1) how broadly is CRP implemented in US schools? (2) What is the social and emotional impact of CRP on immigrant students? (3) And what are the academic impacts of CRP on immigrant students? As an additional analysis I looked into what some of the limitations of CRP are. In this section I will discuss my findings on these four topics relating to culturally relevant pedagogy and immigrant students.

#### ***CRP implementation in US schools***

My first question in my rationale was how broadly is CRP implemented with schools within the United States?

This question proved difficult to answer. The research surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy and immigrant elementary students, is composed primarily of qualitative data. Quantitative data like how many teachers, schools or districts are systematically implementing culturally responsive pedagogy was lacking in my search. This could be attributed to the

ambiguity within the terminology attached to the theory as well as the lack of consistency amongst CRP classrooms (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). In order to be able to track how broadly CRP is being implemented within the US, there would need to be clearer structures around CRP practices and more specifically defined terms that are understood and equivalent amongst the education community (Paris, 2014). Though vast qualitative data on CRP and immigrant students is quite telling and useful, it does not allow for researchers to track whether or not CRP is growing or declining among US schools, or which parts of the country are implementing CRP and which parts are not. It also makes for a less powerful argument for implementing CRP in classrooms. Without clear numbers and success rates, school boards and leadership may not be convinced of the value and without support from leadership committed to shifting systematically toward culturally sustaining education, teachers who are committed to implementing these practices will be fighting an uphill battle.

Though quantitative data on how broadly CRP is implemented throughout the country is lacking, amongst the teachers in my school, many reported implementing culturally relevant practices within their classroom. Some teachers reported that what they do to implement CRP in their classroom is include texts that reflect and represent a diverse population of students in order to promote cultural acceptance and diversity. Others reported that they were using culturally relevant practices by including posters of prominent Latinx figures in the room. Both of these practices are incredibly important in allowing our students to feel seen and valued, however both are merely scratches to the surface of true cultural relevancy. In both cases the intention the teacher has is to present to their culturally and linguistically diverse students that they have a place in the classroom. It does not however give the students an opportunity to participate or educate their teachers or their classroom on their personal cultural context. For example, using a

text that is about a boy living in Mexico City is not actually culturally responsive to a group of immigrants from rural Guatemala. Though it may be closer than a book about a white boy in the suburbs, it still does not represent their experience, and assuming that it does may make them feel stereotyped or generalized. I do think that providing representation of many cultures and contexts amongst classroom texts and visuals is critical, but I believe that in order to be truly culturally relevant teachers need to be taking their culturally relevant practices further than this. Allowing for classroom and one on one discussion about students' individual cultural context is a start, this can inform teachers on which texts might be interesting for specific students in order for them to engage with the learning in new and more culturally relevant ways. There are other teachers at my site who have culturally relevant practices embedded into nearly every part of the classroom experience. One teacher reported including cultural learning targets along with their other learning targets in order to promote consistent conversation about the importance and the value of culture and its diversity. Within the dual language program, the majority of teachers are committed to being culturally responsive in their practice and most have reported feeling fairly confident in their ability to do so. The depth in which CRP is embedded however, varies from classroom to classroom, as we also see in the research. The philosophies behind bilingual education overlap with the philosophies behind cultural relevancy, therefore the two incite much overlap. Some teachers from the monolingual strand have reported feeling as though there are far less culturally responsive practices in the monolingual classrooms than in the dual language classrooms. This could be because the dual language program has received more professional development from a multicultural lens. Overall, as a school, the theory of CRP is reviewed and well understood. However, just like the research has suggested, there is a lack of explicit instruction on how to holistically implement culturally relevant teaching practices at my site.

Amongst the monolingual classrooms in the school, cultural relevancy is present within a few classrooms, however there is no requirement or form of accountability from the school district that it be implemented.

Because of the social and cultural context of my school, being located within Washington State, housing a dual language program and being home to many children of immigrants or young immigrants themselves, I think that my site is in an environment where CRP is viewed by most as a positive and important pedagogy within modern day US public education. This creates an environment where CRP receives less pushback than in other areas of the United States. That being said, there are still many systemic barriers that prevent people within my site from being able to be completely culturally sustaining. For example, within the DL program, teachers are encouraged to create thematic units based on the cultures and experiences of the students in the classroom. This is in itself a culturally sustaining practice. The barrier, however, reveals itself when the teachers creating these units are not guaranteed a budget in order to buy anchor texts that are both culturally and linguistically relevant. The curriculum provided by the district, though bilingual, does not appropriately represent the lives of the students in question and has been challenging for many students to engage with. Though it is acknowledged that culturally relevant anchor texts are best practice within a dual language classroom, the district does not necessarily back this up with resources provided. At our site we are lucky to have administration that is whole heartedly committed to these practices and will do all that they can to help, but the mental and often financial load of this one culturally relevant practice inevitably falls onto the teacher.

### ***The Social and Emotional Impact of CRP on Immigrant Students***

My second question in my rationale was what are the social and emotional impacts of

CRP on immigrant students?

Throughout my research on culturally relevant pedagogy and immigrant students the consensus of most qualitative studies is that the social and emotional health of immigrant students is positively impacted by culturally relevant pedagogy. One of the most important aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy is the idea that every student deserves to feel valued for their cultural and linguistic differences and not in spite of them (Gay, 2015; Paris, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2015). A student's social and emotional health is supported when they are able to exist in the classroom as their authentic selves. CRP practices encourage students to be confident in themselves. Though there are not many studies among the research of how CRP impacts the social and emotional health of immigrant students in particular. I think that culturally relevant pedagogy is one of the most important ways that we can support immigrant students within US schools. For too long curriculum and education practice has consistently and systematically othered culturally and linguistically diverse learners with whitewashed curriculum and Eurocentric ideologies, allowing CLD learners to be included if they are willing to conform to dominant culture and reject their home culture. These dominant culture ideologies have also perpetuated the deficit mindsets that are so harmful to CLD students (Cadenas et. al, 2021). Isolation and otherness from the dominant group can lead to isolation and low social and emotional health. The emphasis on a home school connection within culturally relevant pedagogy also has potential to enhance the social emotional state of immigrant students. Engaging with immigrant families can help to identify needs and connect families to the resources that public schools can provide them with (Crawford et. al, 2022). This can in turn help to support the social and emotional health of immigrant students by ensuring they are supported all around. Engaging with families also encourages a sense of community between the home

culture and the school culture which is important for social and emotional health in students (Yuan & Jiang, 2018). Though the data gathered from research points indirectly to CRP being beneficial for immigrant students' social and emotional health, there is a lack of implicit data to suggest this. This is gap within the research that needs to be filled. Instead of only focusing on the academic impact, researchers should start looking into the social and emotional health of immigrant students.

Social and emotional learning is important for all elementary aged students. In my school, many of the students are living below the poverty line. Many have experienced or are experiencing trauma that effects their ability to be successful in school. Many of the CLD students at our school are having to navigate life as an immigrant in America. Social and emotional learning and health is critical for these students who are navigating an educational system that was not designed for them. The school has set an SEL goal that each student will be able to name two trusted adults. After two rounds of data collection this year, the school has yet to reach this goal and has planned schoolwide activities to try to encourage students to interact with different adults in their school that are not their teacher. When it comes to social and emotional health of the immigrant students at my site, culturally relevant practices are crucial in allowing them to feel calm enough and comfortable enough to be able to learn. Honoring and valuing their culture and experience allows them to exist as themselves at school, without having to mask or change in order to be accepted. Often students that have recently arrived at our school from another country are stagnant in their academic growth until they have adjusted and begin to feel welcome and valued as themselves in the school community. Without feeling safe and like they belong as a part of the community, students make slower growth. A teacher at my site shared an example of this with a story about a boy from an immigrant family who speaks an

indigenous language at home and Spanish and English as second and third language. This student had spent kindergarten, first and the beginning of second grade in the English only class. In second grade he was facing expulsion for behaviors, had been referred for a suspected learning disability and was an emergent reader. After being transferred into the dual language program, he made 2 ½ years of growth in his reading, reaching grade level standard by the end of second grade. Being in an environment with a lower effective filter, where he saw his language and culture represented and valued amongst his classmates and the content of the learning, he grew more confident and capable. He is now a fourth grader who is reading and writing at grade level in two languages. This student was finally able to find academic success when he was able to feel accepted and relaxed as a part of his classroom community. His social and emotional health were important for his success. Being in a more culturally relevant environment was beneficial to his social and emotional success. Finding a social and emotional state where he could relax into his environment made the difference when it came to his academic success.

Amongst most of the classrooms within the dual language program at my school, teachers are dedicated to social and emotional learning and incorporating it throughout the rest of the curriculum. The district has implemented something called *green time* within each elementary school, during which teachers facilitate positive peer connection, allowing for students to decompress as they enter the space, and enter a productive brain state for learning. Teachers that are implementing culturally responsive pedagogy within their classroom are providing another layer of encouragement for their students' social and emotional states by ensuring that students feel valued for exactly who they are throughout the whole day. Students who feel valued for who they are will be able to put more effort and focus into their schoolwork.

***The Academic Impact of CRP on Immigrant Students***

My third question in my rationale was what are the academic impacts of CRP on immigrant students?

According to the research, which mostly includes qualitative studies, culturally relevant pedagogy has a positive effect on the academic success of immigrant students. The environment of a CRP classroom allows for immigrant students to feel safe, allowing their brain to be able to relax enough to process and retain information. Being able to connect with the content is another way that immigrant students are able to access academic success in a more effective way. Culturally sustaining pedagogy encourages teachers to provide multiple access points for immigrant students beyond the access points that rely on knowledge of the dominant culture (Doucet, 2017; Gay, 2015). This includes choosing texts that represent the students that are in the class as well as ensuring that background knowledge is not assumed and should include themes or units that allow for all to relate to their personal lives, in order to grasp more meaning (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Allowing for more access by providing relevant content to students has a positive impact on the learning of immigrant students (Stevenson & Beck, 2021). CRP also requires teachers and staff to see their students through an asset-based lens and hold all of them to high expectations (Cadena et. al, 2021). A teacher's belief in the abilities of their students is linked to student academic success (Laman et. al, 2018). CRP also encourages a home-school connection. Including families in the school experience encourages more buy in from family. When parents and families are invested in their learning, students are held more accountable, and parents are likely to support students in their success (Hong et. al, 2025). Each of these practices that encourage academic success among immigrant students, must start with getting to know the student themselves along with their cultural context. This must happen first in order to be able to appropriately apply culturally responsive practices.

In my site, many of the students that are immigrants have performed generally lower academically than nonimmigrant students due to many disparities. Namely, a difference in access to literacy within the home. My school implemented a dual language program about four years ago to try and address the language barrier disparity and to allow a more supportive learning environment for the large number of multilingual students entering the school. This program has been working to meet the specific needs of the local immigrant populations in order to strengthen their academic success. As the program has grown and as the teaching staff (myself included) has received more training and guidance on culturally responsive practices, I have seen the engagement of the students increase, along with their abilities in reading, writing and math. I think that providing access to the learning through culturally relevant language, topics, books, and discussion has made a huge impact on the academic success of the immigrant students within the program. This is still a relatively new program and it will be interesting to see what kind of data will be collected in the future to hopefully support the claim that CRP practices are having a positive impact on the academic success of immigrant students. My observations in my site are supported by the research that shows that CRP in classrooms helps to support immigrant students gain academic success.

### ***Limits of CRP in Current Schooling***

Final question, are there any limitations of CRP?

One of the limitations that I found within the research on culturally relevant pedagogy is the load that it places onto the teacher's shoulders. Teachers applying CRP to their classroom are having to do a lot outside of the general workload for a teacher. Aside from taking the time to get to know each family on a surface level, teachers applying CRP also commit to learning about each student's specific home culture and individual circumstances. They also are tasked with

manipulating content or curriculum in order to be more accessible to their students, finding anchor texts that are culturally relevant and authentic, and pre-teaching for background knowledge. In a society where teachers are being tasked with more and more things that are outside of the traditional role of teacher, while often being provided less support within the classroom, it is important that we acknowledge within our academic research the burden being put onto teachers. That is not to say that I don't think the workload required to provide CRP with integrity is worth it. In fact, I think that it is critical for the success of immigrant students. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the burden and suggest that teachers implementing CRP receive appropriate support in completing these tasks.

At my site, teachers have been tasked with creating thematic units surrounding essential grade level standards. The administration of my site has provided planning days within contract hours, where a substitute is called for the class and the teacher uses the day to collaborate with their teammates to design culturally relevant thematic units. This is one way that our administration has offered support in the goal of creating culturally relevant units. There is still much planning that teachers end up doing outside of these planning days. Teachers are also often buying their own materials like culturally relevant anchor texts or rewriting district wide tests to represent both the language and culture of their particular class. These are all things that come out of the time and mental load of the classroom teachers.

It is accurate that the attitudes, beliefs, and work input of teachers will determine whether or not a classroom becomes a culturally sustaining environment or not (Kiramba, 2023). I also believe that becoming a culturally relevant teacher is not something that can happen over a summer. It inevitably takes time, experience, and most importantly reflection. In the last three years as a teacher with the intention of being culturally relevant, I have grown in my capacity

and shifted in my beliefs and practices many times. I have witnessed this in my colleagues as well. Growth and evolution are a critical part of being culturally relevant. Teachers are the key to creating culturally relevant classrooms and school communities, and they need support in order to have the capacity to do so with integrity.

### **Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and/or Schools**

In order to support immigrant students within the US, teachers should be well versed and adept at culturally responsive practices and culturally sustaining classroom environments. In order to be successful, intentional professional development surrounding CRP is necessary. Trainings and development for teachers and leadership should focus on both the theory and the practical application of culturally relevant teaching. Many teachers have a clear idea of the theory and ideology surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy but fall short when it comes to how to actually implement these practices within their classroom. Providing professional development with follow up support will ensure that practices are evolving toward a more equitable school environment. School districts and administrators should be providing these trainings and professional development. They should also be holding schools and teachers accountable for implementation of culturally sustaining practices. Districts should be organizing family nights and events that allow for teachers and schools to better get to know their families, while also allowing families to engage in school in a positive way. They should be inviting culturally diverse families to be included in discussions and district wide decision making. These kinds of supports from leadership would help to facilitate CRP implementation within schools and classrooms.

### **Implications for Future Research.**

Though there is substantial qualitative research that points to the positive effect of

culturally responsive pedagogy on the immigrant student population, the quantitative data is lacking. In the future, quantitative studies on the impact of CRP on immigrant students are necessary. There is a need for clear and concise definitions of terminology among the educational research community surrounding CRP in order for quantitative data to be collected with integrity. A question that must be answered is, how can CRP implementation be measured in a consistent and accurate way? If and when clear and relevant data can be collected, it will be helpful in encouraging school districts to systematically implement CRP on an administrative level, which would then help teachers to implement within their classroom. There is also a need for more comparative quantitative studies between culturally relevant classrooms and classrooms that do not intentionally implement culturally relevant practices and the difference in the impact on the immigrant student population.

There is also a need for more research on CRP in rural areas of the country not only in relation to immigrant students but also in relation to nonimmigrant students that also do not fit into the dominant white centric culture that is the default in public elementary education. I think more research on the difference in CRP success between low socioeconomic status immigrant students and immigrant students from a higher socioeconomic status is also important. Lastly, as stated above, there needs to be more research of the social and emotional impacts of CRP on the immigrant student population.

### **Limitations of the Project**

The research collected ranges from 2013 to 2025. The studies collected in earlier years are written by the original theorists of CRP, Gay, Ladson-Billings and Paris. Studies and analysis collected aside from other researchers ranged from about 2018 to 2025. When investigating the research, I was sure to include both culturally relevant pedagogy and how it relates to immigrant

students specifically. There is a lot of research on CRP and students of color or marginalized students. For this research, I used immigrant students as an inclusion criterion. This also narrowed down the search quite a bit. Another limitation that I implemented in my search was that all studies had to be pertaining to elementary aged students. Any studies that looked into secondary education, I chose not to include. I also only chose articles that analyzed CRP within the United States. There are many articles from other countries analyzing CRP, however I was interested in articles researching CRP within the context of being an immigrant in the US.

Throughout my investigation search terms evolved from *culturally relevant pedagogy*, *immigrant*, and *elementary*. I eventually exhausted all relevant articles from this search, at which point I started substituting the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* with *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, and *culturally relevant teaching*. I also paired these with the term *immigrant students* but dropped the *elementary*. I found many more articles this way but had to quickly check the methodology section to ensure that the study was indeed focused on elementary students. I felt that studying the elementary immigrant population would be more relatable to my current position and would therefore be easier to analyze based on my site.

At my site, I collected data through my observations and conversations with other staff members. For a general idea of overall attitudes towards CRP and whether or not teachers were implementing it, I sent out an anonymous survey to all staff members at the school asking a few questions about their relationship with CRP. About 16 staff members replied, I suspect most of whom were teachers in the dual language program. I don't feel that this adequately represents the entire school, since CRP is embedded into many practices within the dual language program. I think I would have gotten more responses and more accurate data at my site if I had asked teachers the questions face to face in order to ensure that the whole school was represented

across grade levels and between programs. Though the information may not have been quite as accurate as an anonymous survey. I was able to collect some anecdotal information via google forms about some of the successes that teachers have seen specifically in immigrant students using culturally relevant practices, along with a few perspectives from monolingual teachers within the school about the difference in CRP between the two programs. Despite my attempts to collect quantitative data on my site, most of the useful information remains to be qualitative, which reflects the academic research on the topic as well.

### **Conclusion**

As a dual language teacher with a classroom filled of about half immigrant students. My goal in this project was to learn about ways to better support my students through culturally relevant pedagogy. My intention is to be a resource at my site and among my community for culturally relevant practices, and in advocating for CRP within my school. In this paper I have examined the research of culturally relevant pedagogy and its relationship with immigrant students. The three major themes within the research that I explored were the ambiguity in terminology, the two pillars of CRP implementation, and the importance of contextual cultural understanding. I provided analysis of the research questions presented in the rationale and provided my recommendations based on the research and my own observations at my site. Immigrant students within the United States require more support within our school systems. Culturally relevant pedagogy is the way forward toward a more equitable educational experience for all students.

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