



Becoming Culturally Responsive: Equitable and Inequitable Translations of CRE Theory into Teaching Practice

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Abstract

Research on Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) to date has mostly focused on identifying the aspects of education that already work for Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color. Building on this important literature base, this qualitative study examines the *implementation*, rather than the *identification*, of CRE practices. The seven New York City public schools that participated in the study were making school-wide changes for CRE as part of a program for Competency-Based Education (CBE) for personalizing learning for students. Both CRE and CBE are employed in schools to address common issues associated with educational inequities such as irrelevant lessons, teacher biases, one-size-fits-all instruction, and systemic racism. Based on interviews with teachers at the study schools, our findings demonstrated that teachers translated CRE theory into their CBE practice in three key ways: (1) deficit practices, where instructional choices were treated as neutral; (2) access practices, where instruction was differentiated but was not culturally responsive; and (3) transformative practices, where student agency challenged traditional structures. We argue that for schools and educators to meaningfully grapple with the issues of power they seek to address by engaging in CRE, they must embrace and nurture a more radical CRE imagination that leads to deeper school transformation.

Keywords Culturally responsive education · Competency-based education · Theory to practice · Educational equity · Urban education

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Introduction

Despite the politically embattled state of equity work in schools, traditionally, every year districts, schools, teacher preparation programs, and education researchers set out to create equitable educational conditions that lead to improved outcomes for marginalized students. The general discourse of diversity and inclusion work in schools now increasingly includes words like “equity,” “justice,” and “belonging.” These more critical and useful words for thinking about equity, defining equity, and pursuing equity are practically the new normal, such as with the use of the now viral baseball illustration comparing “equity” and “equality” expanding to include “liberation” or “justice.” And yet, these more critical and expansive approaches to equity have not made it to a routine level of classroom practices and thus have not made a systemic mark. In this article, we share findings from a group of schools in New York City who were already challenging the traditional model of schooling through their systemic implementation of competency-based educational (CBE) practices. Theoretically, CBE challenges how traditional schools operate by allowing students to learn at their own pace in the ways that work for them (Casey, 2018). Some of the changes associated with CBE include more flexible grading policies, deadlines, and disrupting the idea of “seat time,” measuring learning by how long a student sits in a classroom or grade level rather than by learning goals. While much of the literature frames CBE as empowering and equitable, it also neglects issues of racial, cultural, and linguistic equity. In 2020 and 2021, scholarship about CBE specifically attuned to racial equity began to emerge (e.g., Levine, 2021). Simultaneously, schools in this study began to explore how their practices could meaningfully include strategies for racial equity and they used culturally responsive education (CRE) as a framework for this exploration. Thus, this study explores how schools adopted and implemented culturally responsive education (CRE) with CBE practices to improve educational experiences for marginalized students, such as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students, disabled students,¹ and multilingual learners.

The research took place in one New York City middle school and six high schools that integrated a culturally responsive education approach to their existing competency-based educational systems. Culturally responsive education (CRE) and competency-based education (CBE) are two approaches to teaching and learning that advance equity through different means. Both CRE and CBE address common issues associated with educational inequities such as lessons irrelevant to students, teacher biases, and standard undifferentiated instruction. The CR-CBE study examined several aspects of how schools blended CRE and CBE approaches school-wide: CR-CBE school conditions, teacher and administrator attitudes, and the impact of supposed CR-CBE practices on student outcomes. For this article in particular, we share findings from the teacher interviews we conducted across the seven schools.

¹ The NYC Department of Education uses the person-first language “students with disabilities.” However, following a Disability Critical Race Theory lens, we have chosen to use identity-first language throughout this article because identity-first language combats the idea that disability is something negative and instead critiques disability injustice (Liebowitz, 2015).

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings entitled her foundational article, “But That’s Just Good Teaching!” in response to what educators have said after learning the simplicity of the teaching philosophies and approaches that make up Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. But if this were true, Ladson-Billings (1995) says, then “good teaching” in classrooms of African American students would not be so rare (p. 159). In this way, the study highlights the simplicities and intricacies of how faculty committed to CRE through professional learning, mentorship, and a conducive school environment, actually move their philosophical commitments toward pedagogical practice. We interviewed 35 teachers actively honing a CRE praxis to understand what their enactment of CRE entailed and how they worked with their students. While CRE is beneficial for all students, including White students, we focused on youth identified in our theoretical framework as the most implicated in the benefits of CRE: BIPOC youth who are either disabled or are labeled an English Language Learner. This article focuses on how teachers adopted CRE into their existing practices, the transformative approaches that emerged, the stubborn areas that did not budge, and, ultimately, what it takes to enact culturally responsive change in the classroom. We argue that to translate CRE theory into a practice that has already established curricular and pedagogical routines, teachers and the school at large must nurture a CRE imagination that can make more radical changes that lead to deeper school transformation.

This paper begins with a review of the literature on culturally responsive education and competency-based education to demonstrate that, ultimately, the literature does not address CRE implementation. Then, we explain the incorporation of critical race theory as a theoretical anchor to frame the research and findings. The teachers in our study discussed the implementation of CRE as part of a *differentiated instruction* practice. In our findings section, we share our analysis of what teachers meant by *differentiated instruction* to capture three key ways teachers interpreted CRE into practice: deficit-based translations, access-based translations, and transformative translations into practice. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of what our findings offer schools and scholars imagining systems-wide CRE implementation.

Literature Review: Implementing a Culturally Responsive Competency-Based Education

Ladson-Billings (2009) examined the commonalities between a set of teachers with a track-record of success working with African American youth. The teachers strongly valued their professions, were passionate about what they taught, they kept their roles and the roles of students flexible (i.e., students sometimes functioning as teachers in the room and the teachers as the learners), they maintained high expectations, they allowed students to be fully themselves, and they made the classroom a space to foster students’ sociopolitical consciousness, and as such, positioned them to identify and challenge inequities. While Ladson-Billings (2009) named the teaching patterns of these teachers *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, in this article, we use the term *Culturally Responsive Education* to encompass all the related strands of theoretical, pedagogical, and school-wide traditions

that recognize the long history of White supremacy in schools (Love, 2019) and have shaped out a vision for an anti-racist, pluralistic, and transformative education for BIPOC youth (Alim & Paris, 2017). These traditions also include Geneva Gay's (2010) *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and Django Paris and Samy Alim's (2014) *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*. Studies of CRE schools and classrooms have shown higher student interest and motivation, higher self-perception and confidence, a greater ability to engage in critical discourse, and greater alignment between youth goals and school goals (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2016; Howard, 2001; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). CRE recognizes that for the identities that inform schools to change, schools must contend with longstanding inequities and issues of power, including imagining a more empowering role for students and families in the work of schools. For this reason, CRE is not only concerned with academic achievement and cultural competence, but importantly, it challenges oppression and fosters the critical consciousness of young people, that is, their ability to question injustices in order to bring about important social change (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Since Ladson-Billings's (2009) research, a wealth of scholarship has added to this vision, including different cultural and linguistic groups such as Latinx youth and Indigenous youth, practices and approaches to teaching and learning, CRE in teacher preparation and other aspects of school systems, and much more (e.g., Aronson & Laughter, 2016; D'Andrea Martínez et al., 2021; Doucet, 2017; Irizarry, 2017; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018; Lee & Walsh, 2017; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Nash et al., 2019; Parkhouse, 2015; San Pedro, 2018; San Pedro, 2021; Strelakova-Hughes & Wang, 2019). Still, overwhelmingly, CRE scholarship has followed the pattern set almost 30 years ago by Gloria Ladson-Billings: researchers look for in and out of school settings that work successfully for BIPOC youth and researchers capture the particularities of that success. Despite the richness of this scholarship, little research addresses what it might mean to change a school or a teacher's practices if CRE were "implemented" across a school system. That is, what might it mean to shift a school or classroom environment to become more culturally responsive? The enduring legacy of the CRE literature and the work of educators, youth, and communities have now led to large systemic efforts to implement CRE. For example, the New York State Education Department committed to implementing CRE when it published its Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (2019) after rounds of feedback and co-construction with community organizers, families, educators, scholars, and young people. The framework outlines the particular responsibilities of implementing CRE for each stakeholder in the education system such as students, families and communities, teachers, administrative leadership at school and district levels, and higher education programs that prepare educators. Concurrent with this effort, after years of community organizing for CRE training for teachers by the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice, the city agreed to spend \$23 million toward culturally responsive education and anti-bias training in 2018 (Chapman, 2018). The question that remains following these wins is whether and how CRE can be implemented in educational systems and classrooms where it is being introduced. This study seeks to answer this critical question.

In a qualitative study of novice teachers, Valtierra and Whitaker (2021) found that a determinant of whether teachers are able to use what they are learning about CRE depended on whether their school policies and demands aligned with CRE to begin with. These findings are supported by a growing number of previous studies. For example, Woodard et al. (2017) studied how literacy teachers in elementary and middle school implemented culturally sustaining pedagogies and found that teachers could face resistance from the school community if CRE is not supported by administrators and by school norms. Further confirming that school environments should align with CRE for it to be implemented, Michener et al. (2015) conducted an ethnographic comparative case study of two teachers implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy for students labeled English Language Learners at schools where the state and local policies were anti-multilingualism, or English Only. While both classrooms were embedded in a larger English-only policy context that CRE starkly opposes (Alim & Paris, 2017), one classroom was in a school that promoted bilingualism and one was at a school that went along with the restrictive state and local policies. The teacher at the more sympathetic school incorporated bilingualism in her curriculum and pedagogical choices, while the teacher at the school that followed local and state English-Only mandates did not make those choices. These studies provide an important clue regarding the implementation of CRE: that school conditions and the support of the school environment matter greatly to a teacher's ability to practice CRE.

In this article, we share findings from schools all working toward a CRE vision as part of their work within the network of schools focused on Culturally Responsive Competency-Based Education (CR-CBE). Like CRE, Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers critiques of traditional forms of schooling as inherently inequitable. Sturgis and Jones (2017) defined CBE as follows: “a systems model in which (1) teaching and learning are designed to ensure students are becoming proficient by advancing on demonstrated competence and (2) schools are organized to provide timely and differentiated support to ensure equity” (p. 07). CBE rejects practices such as (a) setting hard deadlines for assignments; (b) prescribing start and end dates for learning that are based on seat time and grade level, rather than the time it will take individual students to learn; and (c) socializing students to care more about earning points than about learning the material (Levine & Patrick, 2019). CBE literature has argued that as long as students' time in school is disconnected from how they actually learn, school time will be spent maintaining control over students (such as rewarding students for good behavior, order, and compliance), teaching to tests in teacher-centered classrooms, and overemphasizing memorization, all at the expense of creating classroom environments premised on actual learning (Ames, 1992; Nolan, 2016; Sturgis, 2014). Instead, CBE advocates for several paradigm shifts. Among them are: (1) students working toward measurable learning goals; (2) transparency with students about what those goals are and how to achieve them; (3) teacher and student ownership of learning; and (4) individualized and flexible pacing and instruction (Ames, 1992; Laine et al., 2015; Nolan, 2016; Sturgis, 2014; Twyman, 2014).

Ultimately, both CRE and CBE offer critiques of traditional schooling, both are concerned with youth agency over their learning, both are advocates of transparency

with students, and both would call themselves “student-centered” approaches. For these reasons, the district-level partners in the study and the school-level practitioners often talked about the overlap between these two educational philosophies. They asserted that CBE would offer a natural entry point for CRE implementation. However, there are tensions in the ways CBE and CRE conceptualize and operationalize all the realms where they seem to have an overlapping relationship. For example, both CRE and CBE prioritize drawing out students’ learning preferences so that they may take ownership of what they are learning. However, CBE does not have an analysis on power and so it misses that perhaps hidden within the learning targets of a lesson are White middle class cultural values. Assessment questions might privilege the lived experiences of White students, and disadvantage BIPOC youth. While CBE provides educators with practical ways to move away from “teaching to the middle,” or assuming that all students would benefit from receiving the same instruction, CRE is mindful that students’ cultural experiences are meaningfully included in all educational spaces, including how learning is assessed and the tools used to measure it.

Due to these tensions, this research describes the goal of CBE schools adopting CRE as implementing “culturally responsive competency-based education” (CR-CBE). That is, our research focus was whether CRE was meaningfully incorporated into every aspect of teaching and learning rather than superficially “sprinkled in” to existing CBE practices. By virtue of being in a New York City program for CBE, the seven schools in the study received ongoing CRE professional learning and support before and during our research. This means that the schools were already setting the conditions for CRE implementation that previous studies recommend: a supportive administration, CRE-focused professional development, and a policy landscape in New York City and State that provides guidance and opportunities to embark on a CRE practice. This article focuses more on what happens after those conditions are in motion. Paulo Freire (1970/2017) defined praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). In terms of CRE, praxis refers to the iterative change in teacher practice as a result of the ongoing critical examination of issues of education equity (Gay, 2010). That is, how are teachers who are already working to implement CRE in a sympathetic environment translating theory to practice? What changes more easily and what areas are more stubborn or yield tensions that need to be worked through as part of a CRE praxis?

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory to Understand Teacher Practice

Exploring the ways that educators in this study integrated CRE into existing CBE practices required a critical lens that focused on issues of power relating to race, ability, language, and other social and political contexts. Since CBE does not give explicit attention to power in the way that CRE does, we utilized a critical race theory lens to help frame our understanding of teacher interpretations of CR-CBE. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a branch of legal theory that responds to the racial ahistoricism in the law that perpetuates the idea that the law is neutral on matters of race

and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). As such, CRT recognizes that without an analysis on race and power, civil rights litigation will never be sufficient in combating racism. In education, CRT responds to the pervasive inclination to explain away inequitable conditions and outcomes between students of different racial groups. Instead, CRT argues that inequitable education conditions are predictable and logical and that educators and policymakers would be able to see this if they understood the history of how inequities have been systematically constructed (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). CRT cautions that racial advantages and disadvantages can be conferred even in laws and institutions, such as schools, that claim to be race neutral. In fact, it treats race neutrality as a tool of upholding a racist status quo because it simply means racism is not being dealt with (Yosso, 2005). Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, as outlined by Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995), examines how social differences operate in school, and specifically, whether and how schools and classrooms mitigate power differences between cultures and whether they challenge any practices that purport to be “race neutral.”

Since Ladson-Billings & Tate IV (1995) first applied CRT to education, many have added to the theory to include groups left out by an explanation of inequality that centers mostly on the relationship between anti-Blackness and White supremacy (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). With these other “crits,” e.g., LatCrit (e.g., Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), AsianCrit (e.g., Museus & Iftikar, 2013), and TribalCrit (e.g., Brayboy, 2005), other expressions of racism and intersectional struggles such as heteropatriarchy, linguistic oppression, anti-immigration, and anti-Indigeneity can be captured. Of these many necessary extensions of CRT, we borrowed primarily from Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) and certain aspects of Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) to design the study and analyze data. DisCrit recognizes that ultimately the students who are most vulnerable in traditional forms of education are likely to be disabled Students of Color (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016). DisCrit concerns the intersections between race and disability. It is comprised of seven tenets: (a) centering the intersection of race and disability, (b) valuing multidimensional identities and intersecting identities, (c) emphasizing social constructs as context for understanding norms around race and disability, (d) privileging the voices of marginalized populations, (e) considering legal and historical aspects of race and disability, (f) recognizing whiteness and ability as property, and (g) taking action and supporting forms of resistance (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016).

LatCrit adds an analysis of language, culture, and immigration status to CRT (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) and can better support a lens toward equity for multilingual learners of Color. In particular, Yosso’s (2005) *Community Cultural Wealth*, advocated for BIPOC cultures to be treated in education as funds of knowledge (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002), that epistemologies are recognized and centered to combat the default deficit perspectives that schools have of BIPOC youth. According to Yosso (2005):

culture refers to behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people... For example, with Students of Color, culture is frequently represented symbolically through language and can encompass iden-

tities around immigration status, gender, phenotype, sexuality and region, as well as race and ethnicity. (pp. 75-76)

The charge of schools and educators is to honor the culture that BIPOC youth and their family bring *because of or beyond*, rather than *in spite of*, the social precarities they face. For example, Yosso (2005) wrote, the cultural wealth of the Chicancx community includes: *linguistic capital* such as storytelling, *familial capital* such as family bonds and community history, *navigational capital* such as the knowledge attained in navigating and working around the constraints of institutions, among many other types of capital.

Together, CRT, DisCrit, and LatCrit provided a theoretical framework to understand whether teacher translations of CRE theory to practice would exacerbate intersectional forms of oppression or would transform them. This framework conceptualizes communities and cultures, schools, classroom practices, and students as interacting multi-directionally to achieve school-wide CR-CBE systems. Theoretically, CR-CBE systems would not employ one directional or linear relationships where school administrators, staff, and teachers do the teaching and students receive that instruction as “learning.” Instead, CR-CBE schools would engage multidirectional practices where school staff, students, and families practice collaborative learning, constructions or meaning-making, sharing of worldviews and experiences, and teaching (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, a CR-CBE teacher would identify, resist, and transform issues of race, ability, language, identity, power, culture, and tensions between CRE and CBE that would help them deepen their practice.

Methods

The CR-CBE Study was designed and conducted by a project team at the New York University Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, including the authors of this paper, in partnership with the administrators of the Competency Collaborative, a New York City Department of Education program that directly supports the implementation of competency-based systems across a number of New York City (NYC) schools. While this was not a program evaluation, the Competency Collaborative administrators recognized the need to incorporate culturally responsive practices into existing competency-based systems to create better educational experiences for students of Color and they were eager to utilize the study findings to make programmatic changes to improve upon their implementation of CRE. Starting approximately in 2017, schools participating in this CBE program, which by then included over fifty public middle and high schools, began learning about and incorporating CRE collectively. Some schools in the network already had strong histories with CRE, while others were beginning their CRE journey. Competency Collaborative schools were able to further their understanding of CRE through quarterly convenings, training that centered around antiracism, and professional development that featured culturally responsive classroom and curriculum practices. The research did not focus on the Competency Collaborative nor

its ability to provide schools with culturally responsive training, but on the schools themselves and their efforts to practice CR-CBE.

Data Collection

The full CR-CBE project employed a mixed-methods approach comparing teacher CR-CBE practices and attitudes across schools and how school CR-CBE policies and practices influenced student outcomes and advanced equity. In this article, we focus only on the qualitative data collected with teachers because it provided the most in-depth discussion of teaching practices to answer this research question: How do teachers translate CRE theory to their teaching practices? The teachers in the study were faculty across seven study schools in NYC (six high schools and one middle school). The schools were Solis High School, Peabody High School, Owens High School, Jefferson International High School, Bear River Middle School, Park High School, and Granite Hills High Middle School.² All participating schools had already implemented CBE and were at varying stages of adopting CRE. Some started in 2017 along with the CBE program's refined CRE agenda, while others had a longer history of incorporating CRE into their pedagogical and school-wide work. All schools were composed of a diverse student population which included BIPOC youth, disabled students, and multilingual learners.

Teachers were recruited into the study primarily through publicly available email lists and researchers set up a recruitment table outside of Competency Collaborative events to provide information about the study and invite teachers in eligible schools to participate. A total of thirty-five teachers from the study schools participated in interviews between December 2019 and April 2020. These interviews were designed with our theoretical conceptualization of CR-CBE in mind and included questions about their cultural backgrounds, teaching philosophies, teaching processes, relationships with and views of students, their school policies and activities, and how they conceptualized and implemented CR-CBE (See Appendix A for the teacher interview protocol). Each interview took approximately one hour to complete.

During the data collection, NYC schools were shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research activities were halted, students stopped attending classes and it became more difficult to contact research participants. From March until mid-April 2020, the research team ceased recruitment and data collection activities while schools responded to the urgent crisis and student needs. Study participants reported that the pandemic added enormous challenges for schools and that students were facing staff, parent, and family losses. One school, Owens High School, withdrew further adult participation in the study to focus on rapid school changes. Two teachers from this school were interviewed before this point, and we included their interviews in the data for analysis.

² All names of people and schools in the study were changed to pseudonyms for anonymity.

Data Analysis

Teacher interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and uploaded to the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose, for coding and memoing on how teachers constructed and enacted CR-CBE. The research team first engaged a deductive approach to analysis rooted in the theoretical framework and then a subsequent phase for an inductive approach to analysis to allow for unanticipated findings to emerge. For the first approach, we used the theoretical framework and our conceptualization of the areas of convergence and divergence between CRE and CBE to create a codebook with structural codes, or codes that isolated areas of interest to the research and to the theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2016). When coding began, it was focused on categorizing parts of each interview by these structural codes pertaining to aspects of teacher philosophies and practice that were important to a Culturally Responsive and/or a Competency-Based Education. These areas included: (1) teacher perspectives on the purpose of the pedagogies; (2) the skills teachers attributed to enacting these pedagogies; (3) examples of teacher enactment of the pedagogies with subcodes for specific mentions of marginalized identities; (4) how teachers understood the areas of overlap as well as differences between CRE and CBE; (5) accounts of implementation of CRE or CR-CBE; (6) CRE and CR-CBE practices at the classroom level with subcodes related to whether the practice was for lesson planning, grading, teaching, classroom environment, discipline, curriculum, or grading; (6) school conditions, such as school policies or professional learning opportunities, that teachers said enabled their implementation of a CR-CBE; (7) characterizations of their students, particularly their multilingual learners, disabled students, and BIPOC youth; and (8) descriptions of their relationships with families and students.

Accordingly, each transcript was coded by 2–3 researchers independently. Throughout this first round of coding, researchers kept extensive memos on emergent themes. As part of the memoing process, the research team created a “theory cheat sheet” with short summaries of CRT, LatCrit, DisCrit, and our conceptualization of the areas of ease and tension between CRE and CBE. We turned to these summaries as a reference tool and to see whether our emergent findings were beginning to confirm or challenge these theories. At this point, our first round of coding became a longer iterative coding process that developed into pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) to yield findings. Throughout the coding and memoing process, the research team met frequently to talk about which themes were holding up across the data, or in particular settings, and in relation to the larger study’s research questions and theoretical frame. We discussed and honed the codebook during these meetings as well as reviewed interview excerpts against themes to ensure reliability across the team (Banerjee et al., 1999). As part of the larger study, we also collected data from site visits, observations, CR-CBE events and trainings that teachers attended, and from artifacts and documents that provided information and context for the implementation of CR-CBE. During our analysis meetings, we referred to these data to triangulate themes across these methods and determine the prevalent findings.

Through our deductive analysis, we began to find that teachers had varying interpretations of CRE, CBE, and CR-CBE and that these interpretations could

be categorized as deficit-based, access-based, and transformative. To investigate a smaller emergent focus on teacher translations of CRE theory into teaching practice, that is, their enactments rather than just their interpretations of the pedagogies, we embarked on a second, shorter analysis. Because the focus on teacher translations to practice was more geared toward teachers' frames rather than our existing theoretical frame, this second analysis was inductive, rather than deductive and it was meant to confirm, challenge, or complement the findings from the deductive analysis. First, the lengthy teacher interviews were separated into short units, or stanzas (Saldaña, 2016), to isolate three key areas of the interviews that could answer the question "How do teachers translate CR-CBE theory into practice?" The three key areas were: (1) the section of the interview focused on answering practice-related questions with a particular multilingual learner or a disabled student in mind (see the "Student, Classroom, & Teacher" section of the interview protocol shared in Appendix A); (2) sections of the transcript with any mention of CRE or CR-CBE practices and; (3) sections of the transcript with teacher descriptions of CRE or CR-CBE implementation. For every mention of an enactment of CRE or CR-CBE, we coded the interview with emic categories. We combined the emic codes into larger themes of teacher interpretations of CRE and CR-CBE into practice to both characterize each teacher's practice individually and then to look for themes that cut across the different teachers' practices. Our findings from this second emic coding approach supported our earlier analysis of the three levels of teacher implementation of CRE and CR-CBE but, most importantly, we learned something we had not found in the first analysis through this inductive process: that teachers operationalized CRE and CR-CBE largely through an existing pedagogical frame of "differentiated instruction."

Findings: "Differentiated Instruction" for In/Equitable Interpretations of CRE

Our analysis revealed that many of the CR-CBE teacher practices were enacted through what teachers called "differentiated instruction" for their disabled students or their students classified as English Language Learners. What teachers meant by "differentiated instruction" varied greatly, and in turn, so did their practical manifestations of CRE. In our interview with Yahya, a teacher at Solis High School, he told us that the biggest challenge in implementing Culturally Responsive Competency-Based Education (CR-CBE) is that while on the surface an educator might be "talking the talk," they may still hold underlying beliefs of students or of "how things are" that will translate to dehumanizing teaching practices:

You see these teachers who care so much. And then when you check to hear some of the things that they do truly believe in, it's like, oh my God, no way. Please tell me it's not true. Where if a student is failing, it's like, "you know, I'm sorry I gave this student an opportunity. That's too bad." But wait, hold on, this student is living in a homeless shelter. "Well, you know what Mr. Y, I went through tough things in life and I got through them."

As researchers we agree with Yahya that to understand how teachers are implementing CRE, we needed to dig into the meanings behind the concepts of pedagogy that teachers talk about. Teacher actions display their understandings of racism, ableism, and other related forms of oppression (e.g., Arneback & Jämte, 2021). And in turn, we needed to figure out what those actions say about the limits and possibilities of implementing CRE. To do this, in one part of the interviews we asked teachers to select a disabled student or a student labeled an English Language Learner that they work with so that we may focus questions about their pedagogical decisions on those students. We then asked the teachers to describe what they know about the student, how they design instruction for that student, and what that student's day-to-day experience in the classroom entails. In response, most often teachers referred to “differentiating instruction” for the student to cater the learning process to their needs. In this section we share what the practices that teachers described as “differentiating” or “differentiated instruction” revealed about how they translated CRE theory into practice.

Differentiated instruction, as popularized by educator Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999), refers to making changes to classroom instruction that disrupt what is often referred to as teaching to the middle, or assuming that all students would benefit from receiving the same instruction. Instead, when teachers differentiate their instruction, they adopt more effective, student-centered approaches. Differentiated instruction means varying the course content, the learning process, the products students create to show their learning, and the affect or tone of the classroom environment to meet the specific learning needs of individual students (Tomlinson, 1999/2014). It is not surprising that teachers in our study brought up differentiation practices in the context of being asked about both CRE and CBE. All three pedagogical frameworks—CRE, CBE, and differentiated instruction—are geared toward creating student-centered classrooms (Santamaría, 2009). Because the concept of “differentiation” is already common parlance in schools, it stands to reason that it would be an entryway for teachers to understand and implement CR-CBE.

But like many concepts adopted en masse in schools, differentiated instruction has lost much of its meaning. It is easy to walk into any school and hear the phrase as justification even to inequitable practices such as student tracking and ability grouping. As is the fate of concepts that become buzzwords, it can have many meanings that are quite different from Tomlinson's (1999) framework and from even the most crucial part of differentiated instruction: decentering the teacher and centering the student. Indeed, some of the teachers in the study operationalized differentiated instruction, and in turn operationalized CRE, in this inequitable way. Other teachers used differentiated instruction to make existing learning goals more accessible to their students. And a few teachers fostered student agency and utilized approaches where students were able to co-design their own learning experiences. We separated these different treatments of differentiated instruction that teachers discussed in the study into three categories: (1) deficit-based approaches; (2) access-based approaches; and (3) transformative approaches. Table 1 provides examples of differentiated instruction from the teacher interviews by category of approach.

Table 1 Examples of deficit-based, access-based, and transformative practices across different areas of teaching and learning from interview data

Area of Teaching / Learning	Deficit-Based Practice	Access-Based Practice	Transformative Practice
Curriculum	There is a set curriculum that all students use	The teacher generates a list of book options from which students can choose for a class activity. Choices represent different cultures and reading levels	The teacher makes curricular decisions by first finding what social issues students want to learn about
Planning	All students receive the same instruction. If a student needs help, the teacher relies on the student to self-advocate for that help	Each student follows their own individual pace for meeting the same learning target	The teacher balances differentiated instruction with communal learning when community would help foster critical consciousness or allow for students to learn from each other's cultures
Teaching	There is a main lesson most students follow. "Struggling learners" are provided adjusted versions of that lesson with remedial activities such as vocabulary lists to review before moving on to the main lesson	The teacher makes room during class time and activities for students to provide examples or bring their interests and identities into the lesson	The teacher and students make decisions about how to approach learning together. During the learning process, the teacher stops to reevaluate power dynamics between students and between the teacher and the students. This allows the classroom community to make changes so that no student falls through the cracks
Classroom Structure	Students are grouped by ability, that is, how well they are doing in class. Students who are labeled "struggling learners" work directly with the teacher	Students are grouped by assets the teacher identifies (e.g., the teacher may notice one student is a strong leader, another is most interested in the subject, another likes to provide linguistic support, etc.). Grouping is expected to leverage student assets so that they can support one another in reaching the learning goals	Besides collaborating on assignments, students work with one another to make decisions about what to learn, the social issues they want centered in the classroom, and to introduce new thoughts or ideas. The teacher then meaningfully integrates this information into the classroom structure and curriculum

Deficit-Based Approaches: Differentiation For “Strugglers”

I have four students who I know struggle in my class and so I sort of plan for three of the four of them that way—sort of very similarly. I have two students who have attendance issues, so I plan differently for them. And then for all of the other students in the class I sort of plan the whole lesson and then I differentiate. So, everyone is getting experience with the basic lesson but then my students who struggle including Jasiel have the additional scaffolds and supports.

In our interview with Rebecca, a teacher at Park High School, quoted above, we discussed a disabled student in her class named Jasiel. Rebecca did not disclose Jasiel’s disability other than that he has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and that she is diligent about planning according to the accommodations it lists. According to Rebecca, Jasiel struggles in all math classes, and especially in her statistics class because statistics relies heavily on reading comprehension. Even though Rebecca was invested in Jasiel’s success, her interpretation of differentiation was making changes for him so that he could overcome his challenges. For example, when planning with him in mind, she thought about how to seat him strategically to minimize distractions while other students worked in groups. For her, differentiated instruction meant having a lesson for all students, and then only differentiating for the “struggling learners.” This approach to teaching is reminiscent of triage at a hospital, except that young people’s disabilities are not a problem to overcome. When we asked Rebecca what she could tell us about Jasiel culturally, she realized she did not know much about him as a person. She said, “[answering this question] makes me feel terrible because no, I really can’t [tell you about his culture]. Yeah, I just know that he is a Hispanic male, cisgendered male, heterosexual. That’s all I know.”

A deficit interpretation of Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) might acknowledge differences in student cultures and might even claim that the cultures are treated equally in the classroom. In practice, the teacher does not attempt to deal with differences nor does the teacher tap into the languages and cultures of students to celebrate and sustain those cultural forms (Paris, 2012). Of course, calling this approach a “deficit-based approach to CRE” is misleading to the definition of CRE; there is no deficit approach to CRE. A deficit perspective that focuses on what students cannot do and norms instruction in a way that favors and centers particular students, namely White, abled, English monolingual, and U.S.-born children is exactly what CRE combats. But for some of the teachers in the study who used differentiated instruction to interpret CRE, that is how CRE is sometimes understood. For example, Daniel, another teacher at Park High School, had English Language Learners (ELLs)³ and disabled students recite their speeches aloud for him allowing Daniel to write the speeches for each student. This dictation strategy, Daniel said,

³ The authors of this paper consider the term English Language Learner (ELL) a deficit term that erases the linguistic pluralism of the young people it labels. We use the term because it is a legal classification of students and in New York it is supported by a set of procedures under Part 154 of the Commissioner’s Regulations (CR Part 154).

Table 2 Teachers by school by category of practices

	Deficit-Based and Access-Based Practices	Access-Based Practices	Access-Based and Transformative Practices	Trans-formative Practices
Solis High School	Prudence	Yahya Cynthia	Myra	
Peabody High School		Robin Jackie Derick Lewis	Kyla Stephanie	
Granite Hills Middle School	Erik Maurene Elliot			
Owens High School	Sybille	Hazel		
Jefferson International High School		Madison Claudia Roseanne John	Mary	Victoria
Bear River Middle School	Christine Regina David Gabrielle	Dolores Lucca		
Park High School	Nina Rebecca Adela Daniel	Debbie Whitney Jerry Sasha		

was meant to keep ELLs and disabled students up to speed with the rest of the class. While Daniel’s reasoning was to help save time and keep all students “on target,” writing *for* them is not a support; it’s a shortcut and a sign of lowered expectations. Daniel wanted to treat students “the same as possible,” a philosophy of neutrality that is not only inequitable because students approach learning differently, but one he did not actually follow. Instead, his actions were unsupportive, minimizing, and stigmatizing to ELL and disabled student differences.

A deficit practice may be anywhere from color-evasive (e.g., one-size-fits all approaches that ultimately seek to homogenize students) to deficit-oriented (pathologizing BIPOC student cultures, languages, and ways of learning). It is important to note that Daniel, Rebecca, and the other teachers who utilized deficit-based approaches did not only have a deficit-orientation toward their students. Table 2 imagines these practices on a spectrum from deficit-based to transformative, and lists teachers where the practices they described in their interviews fall within that spectrum. All teachers cared about their students and had complex pedagogies such that their practices often encompassed different categories. But importantly, the

teachers who used any transformative practices, the practices that align most with CRE, never had deficit-based approaches. We argue that this is because teachers who used transformative practices did not think of their classroom as having one main lesson that then must be accommodated for “struggling” learners.

Access-Based Approaches: Differentiation “For All”

Erik, a history teacher at Granite Hills Middle School, recognized that not all his students were going to love the main approach that he used in his class: storytelling. As a history teacher, rather than directly and uncritically lecturing about history, he had his students become historians themselves: they delved into primary documents and piece together their own story from those documents. However, if a student did not enjoy the particular story, Erik at least provided an array of tools and strategies that students could choose from to complete the work. For example, one of Erik’s students was Andrés, a young person classified as an ELL, of Mexican descent, who speaks Spanish at home with his family and prefers English with his peers in school, and whom Erik also described as “very athletic” and “inquisitive.” Erik provided Andrés with read-aloud software and a translator that he found worked well for him. Importantly, he let Andrés choose whether or not he wanted to use the tools available to him knowing that sometimes he might not need them. Erik is undoubtedly a supportive teacher that thought about making learning accessible to Andrés while making room for Andrés to make decisions for himself. As a teacher that uses this approach to differentiation in conjunction with a less traditional form of teaching through storytelling, Erik’s instruction is thoughtful. Still, Erik’s teaching through storytelling is informed by a “one size fits all” approach to teaching. From the following exchange, we see that if a student does not enjoy the storytelling approach, their only other option is to conform or yield to the teacher’s approach in order to complete the assignment or find other strategies that may be more disinterested/apathetic:

Interviewer: It sounds like Andrés really benefits from storytelling. How is this different compared to your other students or how you might plan for people who don’t learn best through storytelling?

Erik: You’re uncovering one of my biases now because I believe that all people learn really well through storytelling, or that storytelling is kind of a fairly human phenomena. But I’m not the storyteller in the room. And so when I think of other students who are more likely to say, “okay, can you just get to the end and tell me what the work is?”—students who are a lot more interested in checking the boxes or, or making sure all of their work is done all of the time—The sources are available, the scaffolds are available.

In short, Erik has honed an approach to teaching that focuses on engaging students and on building skills such as those an historian would use. For students for whom the style does not work, they at least have a roadmap to access the learning goals and will get some form of individualized attention from the teacher. Like Erik, most teachers in the study were caring instructors who were looking to engage their students, who were able to talk about their students' strengths, and who looked for ways to help their students to feel included in the learning and in the classroom community. Like the other teachers who used access-based strategies, Erik embraced a "for all" mentality where there are several set entry points to learning for their students, chunked learning targets so students can work in a sequence that builds in complexity, and scaffolds, or supports, that are meant to be removed along the way as students become more independent. All of these meanings of differentiation could be called "good teaching," but importantly, and despite teachers' best intentions, these "for all" strategies for differentiating instruction were often, and ironically, never "for all" the students in the room. If Erik imagined his approach by thinking with a culturally responsive lens, he might have invited Andrés and his other students to investigate the forms of storytelling in their cultures, their families, and in the media that they create and consume. This might have brought to the classroom a variety of storytelling styles and methodologies that they could sustain (Paris, 2012) while they utilized them to study history together. But the access-based practices the teachers in our study talked about fell far short from culturally responsive goals.

The closest that the access-based practices in our study got to being culturally responsive was when teachers would rely on student interests to plan lessons. For example, Hazel, a teacher at Owens High School, encouraged students to do their senior portfolio projects on using a modality they were interested in, and, knowing her student, Harvey, was interested in making videos, she suggested he use videos as a vehicle for learning. Staying within the project guidelines, Harvey was able to explore his interest in video making. Incorporating student interests into the classroom could be seen as an entryway to *cultural competence*, when students are able to use their own cultures and languages as "a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). However, sprinkling in student interests is not the same as changing the character of assignments to be culturally responsive to students. Furthermore, if culture is only treated as a bridge to learning, then these "bridges" may in reality be bridges to accessing the dominant White, middle class, monolingual, abled norms. As Paris and Alim (2014) put it, students' cultural ways cannot be "deficiencies to be overcome" (p. 87). Instead, a culturally sustaining educator centers the linguistic and cultural practices of oppressed groups for their own sake and not in order to eventually erase these cultural and linguistic practices in favor of other ones.

Ultimately, access-based teaching practices, particularly when they came from teachers who were otherwise "talking the talk" about culturally responsive teaching, are a symptom of a larger problem: the lack of a culturally responsive imagination in practice systems-wide. For example, Mr. Yahya, a teacher at Solis High School, identified deeply with his students. He described himself as a Brown, Muslim man, who grew up in Harlem, and who knows what it takes for his students, particularly his boys of Color to succeed in school. He aspired to "deconstruct [his students'] colonial mindset" by helping them to question injustices, think beyond grades as

a reason for learning, help them to combat toxic masculinity, and support them in making connections between their learning and the real concerns of their neighborhoods. What holds Yahya back from fully integrating these perspectives into his teaching is what makes his teaching practices mostly access-based: that a lot of what they have to do in school, such as meeting certain learning standards, while not useful to students' real lives, is based on systemic compliance. As Yahya often says to his students, "we sometimes have to do things we don't want to do in life."

In their study of the tensions teachers faced in creating student-centered learning environments, Serrano Corkin et al. (2019) found that teachers often got stuck in a series of dilemmas well captured by the Windschitl's (2002) framework for understanding the evolution of teachers utilizing constructivist approaches. The dilemmas were: (1) *Conceptual dilemmas* where teachers may not fully understand what student-centeredness means; (2) *Pedagogical dilemmas* where teachers might not know how to plan and teach curriculum that is student-centered; (3) *Cultural dilemmas* where teachers might not know how to redefine the role of "teacher" in order to make the classroom more student-centered rather than teacher-centered; and (4) *Political dilemmas* where there is resistance from others within the school system including existing policies. When we looked at the translations from theory to practice that the teachers in our study employed, certainly this framework is applicable, with a few extensions to include culturally responsive education as part of student-centeredness. Some of the teachers who utilized deficit-based approaches may be experiencing a conceptual dilemma around what CRE is. At the same time, they might have downright disdain for oppressed students and may simply not want to understand a pedagogical approach that would humanize them. The teachers who utilized access-based practices, however, ran the gamut of possibilities for the dilemmas they faced. Yahya, for example, described a *political dilemma* where his practice was stifled by the existing parameters of what he had to teach. Erik might have been experiencing both a *pedagogical dilemma* and a *cultural dilemma* because he was unaware of how to center his students' cultures in a way that would decenter his preferences as a teacher.

Even though access-based practices are not inherently culturally responsive, and although they do not address root causes of systemic racism or help students become agents in their sociopolitical contexts, they indicate that teachers care about their students and want them to succeed. However, if ideas of success go unquestioned, these practices could be inadvertently reifying oppressive dynamics. For example, creating room for students to make choices based on their preferences or interests to *bridge* to learning targets that were not created with their cultures in mind, means the classroom is not defining success on their terms. As Paris and Alim (2014) warn, when practices meant as a bridge for students for getting from where they are, to what the classroom teachers, and whatever they adhere to, want them to be, then the practices are bridging to the standardized condition of schools: White, middle class, able-bodied, monolingual norms. Accessibility is not enough for educational equity because accessibility does not shift how we define student success and how we share power with students in all aspects of the classroom.

Transformative Approaches: Differentiation for Agency and Change

I have many students from Yemen, and they were adamant that I teach a dance called dabke that I didn't know about before. I was hesitant to teach it because of wanting to teach about the dance well and with honor to the dance itself. So, I studied it, I got resources from other dance teachers, and then I was very honest with students about the fact that I was learning this dance with them. And I don't want one group of students to have to represent an entire culture. So that's where I feel like my work of research comes in. Yet at the same time they were interested in choreographing, the students from Yemen, were interested in choreographing and helping to assist in teaching.

Mary, quoted above, is a dance teacher at Jefferson International High School, a school specifically for recently arrived immigrants who are classified ELLs. She provided several examples of transformative practices in her dance class. Differentiation in her class meant her students were co-teachers. They wrote community agreements, proposed dances they wanted to learn and share with others in the classroom, co-hosted professional dancers, took turns choreographing, and they used dance to unpack and raise awareness for social issues they are facing like anti-immigration policies, gender inequities, and police brutality. When we asked her about a disabled student in her class, she mentioned Selena. Like many teachers we interviewed, in regards to Selena's disability, Viviana only shared that she had an IEP. Beyond this, she had a lot to say about Selena:

She learns by doing. She's an excellent choreographer who when she's working in her group is very strong at showing her creative and critical thinking and coming up with new ideas. At times if she is tired or if there's too much direct instruction, she'll shut down a little bit. But when we're engaged in the students' choreographing, she's creative, she's engaged, she's enthusiastic about what we're doing. She's someone who often—like for example, we had guest artists come who did a performance about healthy teen relationships. And I offhand asked her if she would introduce them and she spent time at home writing herself a script to do it and then memorized it and was exemplary at welcoming this dance company into the space.

Selena was a central part of the class, a co-teacher, and not someone that Mary discussed as having struggles to overcome or as someone she had to accommodate to make learning accessible. Overall, this is the ethos that teachers who used transformative practices brought to their understanding of differentiated instruction for the individual learners in the room. Transformative interpretations of culturally responsive education make students collaborators and co-constructors in deciding the curriculum, rather than having them pick from a menu of pre-made options “for all.” With this shift in the teacher-student relationship, students were better positioned to provide feedback to their teachers that would lead to important changes in class structure. In a sense, transformative practices led to more transformative practices. This was the case when Victoria, an English and History teacher also at Jefferson International High School, asked her students for feedback after noticing

that not everyone voted when they were deciding together how they would split into groups for an activity:

We did a vote and then after I told them the results, I said, “I noticed not everybody voted. Should we go with this vote or should we throw this out and do a new vote?” And then one of the students said, “well, I didn’t really understand the ballot.” Even though we wrote it, the way it came up in the Google form wasn’t clear. And then I said, okay, well what can we do to make it clear? And another kid had another idea. And so now we’re using all their ideas and tomorrow we’re going to do the vote again. And so having that takes a lot of time, but it’s also completely student-driven. And students are working together to find a process that works and their ability to connect with each other’s ideas and ability to find a way to do the work is equally important as the project they’re going to end up doing.

Victoria used a democratic decision-making process in her classroom, and when that and other aspects of classroom routines and lessons did not work, she opened up the process for feedback, which in turn allowed her to better focus on student needs. Over time, these types of practices build a classroom community where strong relationships lead to more authentic cultural and linguistic work, where students are teachers in the space and make curricular and other classroom decisions, and where they can exercise their critical consciousness. All the teachers who utilized transformative interpretations of CRE challenged the oppression that students face whether by making student counternarratives a central part of their learning, by creating space to understand and find agency within a social issue, or even by working through oppressive situations that come up between students and affect their interpersonal relationships. Table 3 provides examples of anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and transformative practices that teachers in the study used.

The practices listed in Table 3 are not perfectly anti-oppressive or anti-racist; they are seeds that lead to a transformative praxis, or reflection and action against oppression and toward social change (Freire, 1970). This makes these teachers what Nieto et al. (2002) call *transformative intellectuals* who in turn make the classroom a space for students to “critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Culturally Responsive Education can only happen with a transformative interpretation that makes student cultures and languages the starting points and the endpoints of learning. That is, teachers who enact CRE look beyond what students can do to access material to instead look to how education can be designed for young people and with them to begin with. These teachers “believe equity and access can be best achieved by centering pedagogies on the heritage and contemporary practices of students and communities of Color” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 87) and they teach students to be flexible cultural and linguistic border-crossers.

Table 3 Examples of transformative practices that challenge oppression

Teacher	Example Transformative Practice	Quote
Kyla Peabody High School	Student counternarratives and lived experiences inform the framing and starting point of the lesson	<p>“What I’ve learned from my students is, I mean, just every experience from ‘my parents are undocumented, the government is actively harming my family.’ Or just lack of access to opportunity. And the fact that their interface with the government is going to a public school, in which I think they feel really valued by their teachers, but in which they are also aware of the fact that our school is underfunded. Aware of the fact that our school doesn’t have the same kind of college acceptance rate as [a well-funded school]. [These issues] don’t make them feel valued or make them feel like the government is trying to help them in any way. And I think what I’ve learned is that the goal is to certainly look at the ways the government has caused harm. And also emphasize the fact that when the government has maybe then done better things, it’s not because the people in government suddenly understood. It’s because peoples’ power force them to make those changes. Particularly in the way that I teach the civil rights movement. And we’re doing a unit on voting rights right now. The 15th Amendment was passed, and then the 19th amendment was passed. The government didn’t change voting rights. People changed voting rights. So, I think that has sort of shifted the way I’ve tried to teach.”</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Teacher	Example Transformative Practice	Quote
Mary Jefferson International High School	The teacher recognizes oppression students are facing in and out of the classroom and they use the course to unpack these and advocate for change	<p>“Students create dances advocating for changes in society that affect them directly or that affect their families or that affect our greater [NYC Borough] community. When the DREAM Act was being proposed in the New York Senate, we talked about the right for immigrants to have an education and students created dances about the DREAM Act. They have also created dances about Black Lives Matter. And right now, we’re getting ready for an all school flash mob about gender inequality, working for gender equality and students are leading workshops and sitting on committees with teachers and planning this event. I think that part of personalizing education is being open about the personal, institutional, and societal forms of racism and marginalization that we have.”</p>
Victoria Jefferson International High School	When a racial or cultural conflict arises, the teacher addresses it with care	<p>“There was a fight between a boy from Haiti and a girl from Senegal. The girl from Senegal was saying that the Haitian boy was looking down on her but really like ‘people from Senegal had come to help people in Haiti when there was an earthquake and they shouldn’t be looking down on them.’ And so, we sat down and we talked about where those ideas come from and what we know about them. Like ‘who told you that African people were less? Where did you learn that?’ We talked about who it benefits if Haitian people have a low opinion of African people? And then I saw all these dark-skinned Dominican kids who were just listening and I was just watching them listen. And I was trying not to shame the Haitian kid because he really was just parroting beliefs that he had learned and I wanted him to think about whether they actually served him or not.”</p>

Discussion

Our findings allude to an important skill set that unveils the differences in how educators translate CR-CBE into practice: culturally responsive imagination (CRE imagination). Educators whose interpretation of CR-CBE manifested as deficit-based and access-based practices lacked imagination, while educators with transformative practices reflected seeds of imagination that better realized CRE principles within CBE practice. Naming how CRE imagination is reflected in educators' implementations of CR-CBE and the significance of CRE imagination provides an opportunity to at least partially bridge the well-known theory to practice gap. We observed seeds of imagination in Kyla's use of counternarratives and lived experiences, Mary's strategy to use dance to unpack oppression, and Victoria's engagement with conflict. Although there were recent calls to reimagine education through a culturally responsive lens as the United States responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and supposedly experienced a shift in collective consciousness triggered by highly visible anti-Blackness (Bamberger, 2020; Ferlazzo, 2021; Madkins & Williams, 2020; Parra, 2020; Teachers College Newsroom, 2020), there's very little scholarship that explicitly links imagination as a bridge between theory and practice. We define CRE imagination as a set of skills that bring together critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, and dreaming that is rooted in a sociopolitical consciousness, a strong determination to bring CRE to life in classrooms and schools, and a striking understanding of self, others, institutions, and society. CRE imagination is the ability to think, consider, and dream beyond the current confines of schooling that maintain and reproduce inequities.

To utilize a CRE imagination is to acknowledge and challenge the differences between current realities and possibilities. Countless studies have detailed the ways schools maintain and reproduce educational inequities. As social institutions, schools mirror hierarchical power structures that advantage White cis-hetero abled students, and disadvantage students with marginalized identities; including pervasive and omnipresent norms, cultures, policies, and practices that are seemingly impenetrable. When educators maneuver within these confines, opting to implement practices that do not challenge this reality, they employ a superficially limited imagination. Arguably, it takes very little imagination to examine one's predominantly White curriculum, classroom decor, and philosophies and decide that the way to be more inclusive, an oversimplification of CRE and CBE, is to "sprinkle" in a few books, word problems, and assignments that feature students' cultural holidays, traditions, and foods to the set curriculum. A CRE imagination pushes and infringes upon the boundaries of "what is" and "how it has always been" to conceive of a world absent of institutional oppression (Green, 2020; Gutiérrez et al., 2017).

Practitioners who translated CR-CBE as deficit-based and access-based practices, like Yahya, Rebecca, and Erik in our study, are "holding too firmly to the world as it is," (Enlow & Popa, 2008) prioritizing the reduction of inequities. However, we believe that reducing inequities is not synonymous with building equity. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002), author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* says,

Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us. (Kelley, 2002)

The reduction of education inequities does not inherently challenge the cultures and practices that created those inequities. We see this dynamic in Erik's provision of read-aloud software and a translator to his multilingual student Andrés for a storytelling assignment. While the resources Erik provided reduced inequities in language-based accessibility, he did not fundamentally interrogate the lesson in itself or how the assignment could be more culturally responsive with Andrés. All educators in our study could benefit from collaborating with students to engage in the mental work of imagining how teaching can be culturally responsive. CRE imagination is the mental work of creating new realities, and more specifically, co-constructing new realities. Educators like Victoria, Mary, and Kyla's transformative practices were rooted in the ways they collaborated, brainstormed, problem-solved and conceptualized the world collectively with their students or in ways that were student-centered. Positioning students as co-teachers and co-constructors of culturally responsive teaching and classrooms is *one* aspect of imagining together. Engaging students', specifically marginalized students', imaginations is another. The CRE imagination of youth is essential to moving beyond privileging the dominant ways of thinking and toward creating the conditions for students' varied cultures, knowledge, and experiences to fuel the construction of new realities. A CRE imagination will engage what's possible as dynamic plurality, multimodality, nonlinearity, and as interdisciplinary ways of knowing, being, and doing (Gutierrez et al., 2017, Green, 2019; Warren et al., 2020). The questioning of what CRE could look like and how it can be realized, and the brainstorming of possibilities can help educators and students reshape and reimagine schooling through a culturally responsive lens.

Appendix A

Teacher Interview Protocol

Introduction

The researcher introduces themselves and the research, reiterates information from the consent forms, and answers participant questions.

About the Educator

1. Let's do some introductions before we jump in, shall we? So tell me about how you'd describe yourself as a teacher to someone who can't see you or your work as a teacher?
 - a. **Needed:** cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, and ability background
 - b. How has your work as a teacher changed due to COVID-19?

2. Do you think your background shapes your teaching?
 - a. If not, why do you think it does not? Have you thought about this before?
 - b. If so, how? How does it present itself in different aspects of your teaching? Have you thought about this before? *Ask for examples.*

Student, Classroom, & Teacher Context

In this section, the researcher should focus on asking questions about either English Language Learners (ELLs) or Students with Disabilities (SWD). It is up to each researcher to alternate the chosen student category across interviews. If the teacher says they do not teach a student of the category chosen by the researcher, then the researcher can ask about students from the other category.

I want to talk about students in your classroom, would you say that you teach students who are (*Pick one: English Language Learners/Students with Disabilities*)?

Part 1

Now let's talk about your students a bit. Think about a student who is classified as an (*chosen category*) for the next few questions.

3. What's the first name of the student that you're thinking of and can you tell me a little bit about them? Tell me about their language, how you think they learn, and what you know about their culture. *Researcher writes notes to refer to with upcoming questions.*
4. How do you use this information to plan for this particular student?
5. How is the way you plan for [student's name] different compared to your other students?
 - a. Probe: What considerations do you have to make? What teaching choices do you make? Ask for an example.
6. What barriers or challenges make it difficult for (*category of student, i.e., either ELL or SWD*) to learn? Do you think race influences these challenges? Do you think (*For ELLs, ask about ability; for SWD, ask about language*) influences these challenges?
 - a. Probe: Institutional challenges not just individual
7. How do you account for these barriers or challenges in personalizing learning for (*category of student, i.e., either ELL or SWD*)?

Part 2

8. It was very helpful to hear more about one of your students. Now thinking about all of your students, could you list a few other important identities of students in your classroom and the main source of challenges that they may face due to those identities? *Researcher jots down the identities and sources of challenges.*

9. What are the assets that students bring to the classroom? Can you provide 1 or 2 examples of how this played out in your classroom?

Unpacking CR-CBE

Now I want to talk more about your classroom practices and approaches to learning.

10. We hear your school is doing competency-based education, culturally responsive education, or both. How is competency-based education different from culturally responsive education? How are they the same? (How do they work together?)
- a. Probe: *Prompt at least 2 of the following*: Teaching Skills/Competencies, Discipline, Materials & Resources, Procedures/Policies, Co-creation, Physical Space, Environment/Climate
11. What do relationships with students look like in competency-based classrooms? How might those relationships look different if the classroom is also implementing culturally responsive practices?
12. What is your relationship with your students' families and communities like? How do you communicate information about learning with families and communities?
- a. Probe: What do you know about your students' families and communities? How would you describe your interactions with them?
13. How do you feel about your ability to create competency-based and/or culturally responsive practices in your classroom? What are the people, resources, or activities that have helped you implement these practices? How do you secure those resources? *Must get clear response for CBE, CRE, and CBE & CRE.*
- a. Probe: What are the challenges of implementing competency-based and/or culturally responsive practices?
14. What is it like to do CRE and/or CBE work as a white teacher among white teachers?
- a. Probe: How confident are you in the CRE and/or CBE work that your community does? Do you think that your CRE and CBE work would look different if a diverse staff was part of your community?
15. How do you track your students' progress on competency? How do you determine whether a student is ready to move forward with course material? How are the ways you track progress reflective of culturally responsive approaches to education?
16. Do you think that competency-based practices and culturally responsive build equity? How so? Are there academic achievement or opportunity gaps at your school? Why do you think those gaps persist? How do white students benefit from culturally responsive education?

17. That was our last question, do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Have a great day!

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no financial or proprietary interests.

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