Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Curricular Decision-making in Elementary Art Education

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CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULAR DECISION-MAKING IN ELEMENTARY ART EDUCATION

by

Adeline White

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Instruction and Curriculum Leadership

The University of Memphis

May 2024
Dedication

For those who believed I could.

To those I know who can.
Acknowledgments

Brett White, you are my forever best friend, and I could not have done this without you.

Thank you for making dinner, for putting away the dishes, and for wiping away tears of frustration when I didn’t want to keep going. Your patient love, gentleness, and steadiness continue to ground me. My Rosie, you helped me through the last push of this dissertation showing me the strength I didn’t know I had. I cannot wait to meet you, and I hope you grow up knowing you can do impossible things.

Mom and Dad, you raised me to work hard and advocate for what I believe in. Without your sacrifices, I would not have been able to do this work. Thank you. Max and Ellen, your questions, curiosity, and time spent proofreading helped this dissertation come to fruition. I’m sorry for all the commas. Mike, Debora, Mallory, Tyler, Haley, and Micah, you are the best family I could have chosen to be a part of. Thank you for loving me through it all.

To my committee: Dr. Bobick, you saw this was possible long before I could. Thank you for guiding my journey in art education since 18. Dr. Falkner, your wit, intentional care, and passion for this work made this dissertation worth writing and sharing. Dr. Happel-Parkins your compassion for students beyond their work, as people, was the most humanizing part of this process. Thank you for creating a space for grad students to be unfiltered and unafraid. Dr. Cook, thank you for your kind nature and willingness to join our team.

My participants, I could not have told this story without yours. Thank you for trusting me to share your passion for art education. I hope it seeps through the words on these pages.
Natalie, Emily, Elissa, and Hannah—thank you for choosing to be my friends. I would not have been able to make it through these years without you. Alex, Lauren, Kim, Michaela, Elizabeth—no one has listened to more venting, given more hugs, and spoken more words of encouragement over me than you have. Your prayers, generosity, love, and ability to enter into others’ pain helped me stay afloat. Beth, I am so grateful for your willingness to share your work and to walk me through the low points of this process. This dissertation is largely inspired by yours.

Amanda Schulter, thank you for showing me the kind of art teacher I want to be. There are few places I’ve felt like I belong more than your art room. And lastly, to my students, this is ultimately for you. I hope you understand that the art world is a place where you belong, and I hope art education changes to make you believe it.
Abstract

Contemporary art education fails to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population in K–12 schools. Although there is an increased understanding and awareness that culture must become essential to the art education of students, there is a gap in research on how art educators individually and collectively create culturally sustaining curricula and how it is implemented into the classroom and received by students. This holistic multiple-case study addresses the lack of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) in the curricula used by art educators across the United States by examining how five elementary art educators designed opportunities to center student culture and voice through instructional content, strategies, and materials. Participants demonstrated a range of sociocultural understanding and pedagogical alignment as they implemented CSP, but their efforts were hindered by the habitus of art education. Findings suggest that to sustain the cultures of their students, elementary art educators dismantle the master narrative, strengthen students’ sociocultural knowledge, build critically oriented art teacher communities, and practice critical reflexivity.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Contemporary art education fails to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population in K–12 schools (Delacruz, 1995; Efland et al., 1996; Greer, 1984; Hanawalt, 2018). In the United States, people of the global majority are expected to outnumber non-Hispanic, white Americans in 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). This growing diversity must be reflected in the choices made for art curricula, which often leave out histories and ignore the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups of people (Crilly et al., 2020; Knight, 2015). Due to factors such as inadequate pre-service teacher training (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), lack of access to quality instructional materials (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; The Art of Education University, 2022), and little planning time and collaboration with others (Ploof & Hochtritt, 2018; Puzio et al., 2017), art educators often resort to teaching content that is easily accessible and/or comfortable. If educators do not approach their curricular planning process with a critical perspective, they risk perpetuating outdated, superficial misrepresentations of culture with an overemphasis on the contributions of European artists.

Art educators disempower students by reinforcing the Western canon teaching projects based on Eurocentric, formalist art (Kraehe, 2010). The strict adherence to the elements of art and principles of design as the standard for quality artmaking, alongside the almost exclusive promotion of European artists or “old masters,” eliminates students’ sense of belonging not only in the art classroom but in the world as artists (Efland et al., 1996; Link, 2019). If student populations in classrooms are constantly changing, how can educators continue to teach the same projects expecting students to be invested and engaged in learning that is not designed for them? Fixed curricula leave no room for highlighting student identity and experiences, and educators miss the value of what students bring to the classroom.
By centering students' lived experiences in the art classroom, educators can equip students to sustain their cultures (Buffington, 2014). Instead of viewing students as empty vessels to fill with content knowledge and technical training (Freire, 1973), educators can utilize students’ cultural and experiential knowledge to create meaningful learning opportunities. Educational researchers and theorists have stressed the importance of student-centered instruction for decades (Banks, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Paris, 2012), yet even with these contributions, there is little research that details what it looks like to implement culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) into the elementary art classroom.

**Statement of the Problem**

It could be misconstrued that art education is not highly regarded due to the lack of attention given to developing rigorous art curricula and assessments. In-service teachers demonstrate an apathy for creating new curriculum that more complexly analyzes the lived histories of students in today’s classrooms and that moves away from the traditional artists and canon of work that has been widely accepted and promoted for decades (Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Chin, 2016; Link, 2019; Pierce, 2020). Art curricula continue to prioritize Eurocentric perspectives, negate the histories of communities of color, and defend racial hierarchies (Crilly et al., 2020; Knight, 2015). This communicates to students of color that their identities and the accomplishments of artists of color are not as valued as those of white artists (Link, 2019).

Many educators go into the classroom unprepared to teach diverse students in terms of race, ethnicity, and ability (Gay, 2000) and avoid engaging students and colleagues in critical conversations (Henry & Constantino, 2015; Knight, 2015; Rao & Pfeiler-Wunder, 2018; Travis & Hood, 2016). These problems are compounded by a lack of visual art standards and curriculum guides that actually measure and promote multicultural practices in the classroom.
or offer projects and lessons that do not homogenize cultures, promote stereotypes, and reinforce hegemonic narratives. These barriers result in a cultural disconnect between teachers and their students (Puzio et al., 2017), and in-service educators feel underprepared to center students’ culture at the heart of the curriculum in a way that is sustaining (Acuff, 2015; Borrero et al., 2018; Woywod, 2017). Although there is an increased understanding and awareness that culture must become essential to the art education of students, there is a gap in research on how art educators individually and collectively create culturally sustaining curricula, as well as how it is implemented into the classroom and received by students (Chin, 2016; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Henry & Constantino, 2015; Link, 2019). In this research, I will explore the dilemmas and challenges of elementary art educators’ implementation of CSP in the curriculum in the United States.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study was designed to examine how elementary art educators conceptualize culturally sustaining curricula by exploring the following questions:

(1) How do elementary art teachers use CSP in their curriculum to promote student voice?

(2) What themes, topics, artists, and strategies do elementary art teachers use to implement CSP?

(3) What barriers do elementary art educators navigate as they engage in CSP?

As the population of the United States increases in diversity, the field of education must transform to meet the needs of all learners (Banks, 1991b). Art is a subject that has historically marginalized people of color in primary and secondary education, and the result of this
inadequacy is a lack of CSP within instruction and curriculum. This study aims to close gaps in understanding how elementary art educators theorize and conceptualize culturally sustaining curricula. It also documents how theory is transformed into practice as participants develop curricula that stem from key aspects of CSP.

This qualitative case study examined how five elementary art educators conceptualized CSP to develop curricula centering student culture and fostering student voice. I focused on elementary art teachers within the United States by selecting a purposive sample who met the inclusion criteria. I recruited art educators who were currently teaching in the elementary art classroom, had at least three years of experience teaching art at the elementary level, and had an interest in designing culturally sustaining curricula. By selecting participants who met the aforementioned criteria, I gained insight into curricular decision-making processes shaped by student-centered teaching philosophies.

I collected data using individual, semi-structured, and artifact-solicited interviews, and observations. Analyzing the educators’ instructional materials, student artwork samples, and project examples helped supplement the interviews and observations to provide a picture of what culturally sustaning educators are doing in their classrooms. The findings of this study can be used to model how art educators created or struggled to create curricula that encompass cultural complexity and promote student voice. Art educators’ stories of overcoming barriers to developing critical consciousness and equitable art education for their students might offer encouragement to those who feel hesitant to implement critical pedagogies in their curriculums.
Clarifying Key Terms

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Succeeding the work of Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2011) and Gay (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2013) on resource pedagogies, Paris (2012) conceptualized CSP as a means of assisting “young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). In their critique of previous asset-based pedagogies, Paris and Alim (2014) pointed out a lack of attention to the problematic aspects of students and their communities’ cultural practices as well as a focus on historical cultural traditions without acknowledging the influence of new, contemporary ones.

With the goal of cultural pluralism, scholars who conceptualize CSP validate an asset-based mindset toward teaching, viewing students and their communities as cultural makers whose knowledge and leadership are imperative to the schooling process. CSP is a future-oriented pedagogy that asks teachers to acknowledge culture as active, consistently changing as students take on new identities in an increasingly globalized world. CSP focuses on student empowerment through language and voice, envisions education as a way to disrupt systems of oppression, and sustains the cultures, lifeways, and dreams of all students. I include examples of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the classroom and as theoretical frameworks in Chapter Two.

Student Voice

Because of CSP’s learner-centered, asset-based approach, it is impossible to design curricula that are culturally sustaining without engaging student voice. According to Cook-Sather (2006), student voice “calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to
the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (p. 363). From this perspective, students are repositioned from inactive receptors of knowledge to powerful collaborators with abilities to transform learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2020).

The term “student voice” although not new to educational research, has become more frequently used in the past two and a half decades (Fielding, 2001). There is no singular consensus on the definition of student voice, and the meaning behind the term often shifts depending on use (Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Rudduck, 2006). Mitra (2005) stated student voice in its basic form includes “youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions” (p. 520). In recent years, scholars have called for a greater foregrounding of student perspectives to address inequities and power imbalances (Robinson & Taylor, 2013), to collaborate with leadership in school reform (Mitra & Serriere, 2012), and influence teacher preparation (Gonzalez et al., 2017). For the sake of this study and its focus on visual arts, I define student voice as students’ verbal or illustrative expressions of meaning regarding self, community, and context to inform, reform, and transform.

Linked to student voice is the concept of student agency in which learners influence, change, and transform their environments. According to Adair (2014), “Agency is defined in the context of schooling as being able to influence and make decisions about what and how something is learned in order to expand capabilities” (p. 219). When teachers formulate opportunities for students’ agency, they include students in pedagogical processes to shape instruction, curriculum, and classroom procedures. In the art classroom specifically, this can take forms of storytelling and counternarratives (Acuff, 2016), critiquing culturally homogenizing and appropriating art resources (Acuff, 2015), and using personal interests and experiences to help
make curricular decisions (Chin, 2013; Howe & Lisi, 2014). A common theme among these practices is the sharing of power and responsibility in the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2020).

The engagement of student voice in education inherently subverts traditional hierarchies in the classroom and school environment. Students possess essential perspectives that provide information educators alone cannot, despite training and years of experience (Cook-Sather, 2020). Instead of fearing a loss of control over the classroom when engaging student voice, educators can “legitimate … the experiences, perspectives, and expertise of students” for mutual benefit (Cook-Sather, 2014, introduction, para. 1). Creating opportunities for student voice in the classroom not only works to empower students, but it empowers teachers too.

Though student perspectives are invaluable in education, this study aims to examine student voice from the teacher’s perspective. There is little research on how educators use their roles in the classroom to simultaneously support and “let go” so that students can develop as leaders in their schools and communities (Mitra, 2005). This study examines how elementary art teachers are attempting to engage with student voices through their curricular choices and pedagogies.

**Overview of Conceptual Framework**

My study aims to depict the process of elementary art educators designing curricula to promote student voice and engage with student culture. To do this, I will depend on three central theories. First, I use Paris and Alim’s (2014) CSP, a more recent link in the chain of the critical multicultural movement, which focuses on critical aspects of education such as cultural dexterity, social transformation, and the foregrounding of traditionally marginalized perspectives to sustain cultural pluralism. Scholars utilizing CSP emphasize students’ lived experiences, voice, and
empowerment in educational settings (Bucholtz et al., 2017; Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Overby et al., 2022).

Second, literature around critical consciousness will aid in studying the participants’ understanding of sociopolitical influences on the process of schooling and how they attempt to guide students in their conscientization. Key to taking critical action is reflection (Freire, 1973), and making space to examine the alignment between classroom culture, curriculum, and conscientization is crucial for an evolving liberatory practice (Mernick, 2021). Those working to forward critical pedagogies in education acknowledge an ongoing commitment to learning and reflecting about power, oppression, and their positions within systems of inequity (Acuff, 2014b; Desai, 2000).

Finally, I use hook’s (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy as a lens for engaging with the spiritual and intellectual growth of students in constantly evolving learning environments. If CSP requires educators to shape learning environments around the students in their classrooms, then engagement in practice reveals how educators exist in their classrooms to fulfill CSP. Engaged pedagogy also substantiates teacher self-actualization as necessary for empowering students.

Utilizing these theories as a conceptual framework will allow me to thoroughly analyze the position of art educators as curriculum designers. Culturally sustaining pedagogies will align with the goals of educators who are working towards a more equitable art education for their students. Critical consciousness will dictate the art educators’ awareness and responsiveness to hegemonic practices in art education and mainstream art education curricula. Lastly, engaged pedagogy will aid in understanding how art educators exist as multi-faceted individuals continuously working with a multitude of students in an art classroom context.
Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters including the introduction, literature review, methodology, three analysis chapters depicting vignettes from the art educators’ interviews and observations, and a conclusion. In Chapter Two, I focus on four key topics in my literature review that narrow in focus to the research most relevant to the study. These sections include elementary art education, multicultural art education, curriculum development, and student voice. In the first section, I describe the external factors that influence art instruction and student artmaking. In the second section, I outline the origins of contemporary educational theories and pedagogies that focus on multiculturalism and equitable teaching practices. These histories in tandem with preservice art teacher education inform scholars’ suggestions for educators developing their teaching practices. In the section on curriculum development, I aim to align the suggestions for educators practicing multiculturalism with the recommendations for curricular reform in art education. Finally, I explore the concept of student voice, and how art educators are using it to transform their teaching and center learning on what is relevant, responsive, and sustaining to the students in the classroom. To conclude Chapter Two, I detail my conceptual framework.

In Chapter Three, I describe the use of qualitative methodology to conduct my study. I selected a comparative multi-case study to explore the teaching contexts, experiences, and curricular decisions of five elementary art educators. During the first round of interviews, I discussed with the participants mandatory curricula and preferred sources for curricular development, the impact students’ knowledge makes on curricular decisions, barriers faced in teaching elementary art, and navigation of personal bias. In the second interview, educators selected a project of their choice and depicted each step required to complete it, offering an
understanding of how they prioritize choice and engage students in representing their cultures, personal interests, and experiences. Lastly, I observed each educator for one lesson to see their pedagogies in action.

In Chapter Four, I explore the participants’ ranges of sociocultural understanding to determine how they embodied culturally sustaining pedagogy. Each of the five participants presented differing positions within a range of sociocultural knowledge and corresponding abilities to incorporate such knowledge into their curricula. The central themes of this chapter include participants’ varying abilities to utilize scaffolded discussions to deepen students’ sociocultural knowledge; research and reflection as tools for strengthening critical sociocultural understandings; and contextual sociocultural knowledge to guide students in artmaking.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the participants’ range of pedagogical alignment. Throughout the data collection, participants expressed curricular aims that aligned or conflicted with the decisions they made during teaching observations. When art teachers exhibited pedagogical alignment, the unit’s main goals were mirrored in their objectives, artists of study, and artmaking exercises. However, when the elements were not aligned, it frequently resulted in shallow conversations and missed opportunities for students to express themselves in their work.

Chapter Six explores the barriers art educators face as a result of the habitus of art education (Link, 2022b). Such barriers include knowledge differences between art educators and their administrators, the perpetuation of building curriculums around media exposure and the elements of art, and the lack of quality resources that help art educators dismantle the master narrative. This chapter discusses why such obstacles make it difficult for elementary art educators to develop culturally sustaining pedagogies.
I conclude this dissertation in Chapter Seven by outlining the limitations of the study design, the central tensions from the data, implications for art education practitioners, and recommendations for future research. Specifically, I urge elementary art educators to dismantle the master narrative, strengthen students’ sociocultural knowledge, build critically oriented art teacher communities, and practice critical reflexivity. It is with these shifts that elementary art educators can imagine new ways of teaching that sustain student culture.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review will explore four key areas that contextualize my study: elementary art education, multicultural art education, curriculum development in multicultural art education, and student voice. The first section will explore the current state of the field of elementary art education as well as some of the challenges art educators face. The second topic will frame the contributions of art education scholars through the origins of multiculturalism by dissecting their shared attributes and recommendations for practice. The third section on developing curricula aims to connect multicultural theories in art education with what art teachers are doing in their classrooms. The last section will outline the role of students as key producers of knowledge in the classroom through voice. I conclude this chapter with my conceptual framework.

Elementary Art Education

Art education in school settings is often justified through claims of its correlation to increased test scores and achievement levels (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013). In most cases, there is no concrete evidence that proves a causal relationship between the arts and achievement (Winner & Cooper, 2000). The justification for art education should not depend on its supposed enhancement of core subjects; artmaking is valuable because it is learning (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). According to the 8 Studio Habits of Mind from Winner et al. (2020), artmaking helps to develop a craft, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, understand the art world, and engage and persist. These habits lay the foundation for innumerable skills students utilize inside and outside the classroom. Art helps students to envision possible futures and outcomes (Acuff, 2020). It sets the stage for vulnerability and empathy, fostering connection and understanding (Overby, 2022; Overby et al., 2022; Poskas,
Artmaking is the creation of cultural capital, especially between those belonging in community with one another, sustaining the lifeways of people as cultural producers (Paris & Alim, 2014a). Art provides opportunities to critique dominant, hegemonic systems of oppression and explore identity through critical consciousness (Mernick, 2021). Art initiates change, and rarely do those “looking in” on art education from outside perspectives see art’s depth, breadth, and power as learning.

There are several gaps in the literature on the field of art education (Galbraith & Grauer, 2004; Pankratz, 1989). From the study of preservice art education (Sevigny, 1987) to the happenings of art classrooms in K–12 schools (Burton, 2004), little research sheds light on how art instruction is delivered and received, for whom, and by whom. To explore this gap, I will examine the positioning of art education within the project of schooling, the purposes of art education and student art, and the external factors influencing the process of educating elementary art students.

**Purposes of Art Education**

Art teachers, administrators, parents/families, and stakeholders all have varying conceptions of the purposes of art education in elementary school. These ideas and opinions are subject to shift depending on personal experiences, formal training, sociopolitical consciousness, political climates, and perceived student needs. As art educators navigate the expectations of adults in schools and of parents/families, they must contemplate how these external factors and conceptions influence their curricular and pedagogical choices, ultimately affecting the students in their classrooms.
Early literature in the field of art education proposed exposure to a variety of artworks to improve students’ aesthetic proclivities and to produce sophisticated adults (Greer, 1984). Under these assumptions, an artist or art expert is the key source of knowledge, and the student’s job is to absorb as much of that knowledge as possible. School art programs are given more recognition when they utilize the knowledge of adults from galleries, museums, universities, or “professional” practicing artists (Leatherbury, 1967). Although professional perspectives can be useful, they are often disconnected from the lives of students.

Educators who view students as empty vessels to fill subscribe to a banking system of education (Freire, 1973). In this case, the teacher consistently makes deposits, and it is the student’s responsibility to collect as much knowledge as possible. Art education publications have portrayed students as “empty” or having nothing to offer in terms of their funds of experiences (National Art Education Association, 1972). This mentality denies possibilities for empowerment through education and continually places the nexus of power on the teacher. Because of this, art teachers often require students to create projects that replicate works of art by “old masters” or imitate whitewashed, antiquated versions of world cultures, signifying that young students are unable to create significant meaning on their own (Delacruz, 1996). This type of art education lacks decision-making, creativity, or critical thinking and restricts “student freedom in the exploration of conceptual complexity in both making and viewing” (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 821). This calls into question the purpose of art education and whether it belongs in the school curriculum. As educators attempt to answer this question, they must grapple with contemporary issues in the field such as the hierarchy of testable subjects, lack of respect for the subject of art education, and the need to justify art education’s place in schools.
The Value of Art in Elementary Education

A hierarchy in education exists to first and foremost support tested subjects ranking art education toward the bottom (Congdon et al., 2008). Art at the elementary level is not tested, meaning no achievement data is collected at a state or national level. This inherently places the subject at a lower status than math, science, or English language arts, which affects teacher professionalism scores, levels of state recognition, and funding. As education becomes increasingly data-driven, art often falls behind many other subjects because students’ learning, achievement, and growth cannot be calculated in black-and-white ways. Because this proclivity towards measurable, provable results is deeply ingrained in the fabric of schooling, art teachers can at times feel their “worth is based on students’ technical production skills and knowledge of a few art historical facts” (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 824). These aspects of art education are often easier to quantify and therefore gain the recognition or praise of those who observe art products in schools with little to no background in the education of the arts.

Art educators name a lack of respect for their art program as the biggest struggle they face in their profession (The Art of Education University, 2022). To illustrate this issue, Efland (1976) shared an anecdote depicting a teacher dropping off her students for art class. She is enthusiastic to leave her “high energy” students but insists she must pull a student to finish a test. Efland deciphered this interaction by stating the art teacher is “valued as a member of the school staff by students and professional peers; yet she also is told that her subject, art, is not as important as are other subjects” (p. 37). In this scenario, art class is necessary, not because of its merit as quality instruction, but because of the space it provides classroom teachers to accomplish their agenda, be it reprieve or time to complete unfinished business with students.
Even though this article was written almost 50 years ago, many elementary art teachers today can relate.

Art educators feel the need to justify their subject to staff, administrators, and parents/families. The pressure that new (and not-so-new) art teachers feel to please and demonstrate success is driven by the larger context of the school and its stakeholders. As art educators navigate this culture of scrutiny, they must grapple with the ways it influences their teaching philosophies and goals for their students’ art education. Hanawalt (2018) interviewed first- and second-year art teachers to understand how an audit culture of accountability and compliance suppresses new educators’ goals and objectives in the art classroom. Through participants’ responses, Hanawalt ascertained:

“Good teachers” perform according to expectations of administrators and school cultures, manage student behavior according to school norms, and provide clear evidence of student learning through documentable, quantifiable results. And “good art teachers” particularly at the elementary level—support the data-focused work of the “core” teachers by giving students and teachers a break in the school routine, integrating core content such as reading and writing into their curriculum, and beautifying the school with colorful student projects that administrators and school faculty can recognize as “good work.” (p. 98)

In this case, the purposes of art education are to appease, beautify, and support the work of core teachers. Through this perspective, art education is not designed for students, but for adults. This mindset is perpetuated through teaching approaches such as discipline-based art education (DBAE).
Discipline-Based Art Education

DBAE is an approach to teaching art that prioritizes a predetermined structure and accountability, focusing on the core areas of aesthetics, studio art, art criticism, and art history. This method of teaching art is defended and legitimized because its structure and organization supposedly offer better indicators of “increasing competency rather than enjoyment” (Greer, 1984, p. 217). Due to pressure on the U.S. to keep up with other nations in the advancement of technology during the Cold War, subjects such as math and science became of increasing importance and influenced the way art was taught in public schools (Efland et al., 1996). Art education shifted from being a creative outlet for students towards a more rigorous study of the four main components of DBAE. Instead of prioritizing student thinking, innovation, and creation, DBAE regards “the works of accomplished adult artists” as the best representation of achievement (Dobbs, 2004, p. 708). The students’ experiences, backgrounds, and interests are sidelined. Although this method of teaching attempts to bring to art education what the rest of the data, growth, and achievement-focused education system values, the question remains, how do we determine what students need within art education? Contemporary scholars in education consistently advocate for curricula that represent students in the classroom while also allowing them to learn about communities other than their own (Knight & Deng, 2016). Even further, Acuff (2020) stated students should “imagine and develop their futures through the art curriculum” (p. 15).

Purposes of Student Art and Artmaking

The purposes of art in elementary school often have more to do with the expectations of adults than students themselves. Some see student art as purely decorative (Efland, 1976), and
others see it as a way to win recognition for their school in competitions demonstrating advanced technical skills. Additionally, the artmaking process is praised for its intrinsic value (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013a) as it provides a creative outlet for students to “express themselves.” Evidence of these “purposes” can be found in many elementary schools and is often used to justify art education in the school curriculum.

Because of the instability of art education’s position in schools, one of the purposes of student art is to look “good” or “impressive.” This can take the form of art-filled hallways for an exhibition or a visit from district personnel, the promotion of a fundraiser, decorating for a school production, or connecting with local businesses to display student work in the community. While these actions are not inherently negative, by engaging in these performances of merit, art teachers aim to justify their class’s status as a reputable subject, deserving of funding and community support. Designing projects for students to create “impressive” work may help the school decoratively or monetarily, but it also reveals the controlling nature of elementary art curricula (Efland, 1976). This catering to adults has a significant impact on the process and products of students’ art education by supporting traditional representations of “quality” art.

The elements of art and principles of design have determined quality in art education since the early 20th century (Efland et al., 1996). Over centuries, the elements and principles have been the foundation for district curriculum guides and for many art teachers, the way they sequence their teaching and instruction (Link, 2019; Pierce, 2020). On the Art of Education University’s annual teacher survey, art educators selected the elements and principles as the second most important topic they teach behind techniques and processes (The Art of Education University, 2022). When art is studied and made solely through filters such as texture, shape,
value, proportion, or balance, it leaves little space to examine the context of the work or let the ideas of students emerge. This way of formatting art education supports the “school art style” which “tells us a lot more about schools and less about students and what’s on their minds” (Efland, 1976, p. 43). When the elements of art and principles of design are left to serve as the totality of students’ art education, students lack critical thinking skills, creativity, and an understanding of art through diverse cultures and histories.

When educators implement teacher-led projects and focus solely on technical skills, it places no intellectual demand on the students. Selecting and designing art projects based on the pressure of successful art shows and the approval of the community, staff, and administrators produces student work “that demonstrates a high degree of formal and technical skill, but is not intellectually demanding” (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 824). In projects demonstrating the school art style, there is often limited input from the students, little differentiation between the students’ products, and a highly teacher-led process of instruction. Works of the school art style are “expected to be appropriately decorative, about ‘safe’ subjects,” and often mimic the artwork of white, European artists (Desai & Chalmers, 2007, p. 7).

When the purpose of student art is to represent European, formalist ideals, it reinforces conformity and obedience (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). Art projects requiring students to exclusively copy their teachers demonstrate the positions of power teachers often occupy in classroom contexts. As educators continue to adopt curricula that glorify the elements and principles of art, highlight the accomplishments of artists in the Western canon, and exclude contemporary artists making work about social issues, they continue to disempower their students and subvert opportunities for them to create meaningful artwork.
Curricular Resources for Elementary Art Education

Curricular resources provided to art educators vary greatly depending on teaching context and district and administrative support. Districts may supply a detailed, standards-based scope and sequence of projects based on a variety of artists with supplemental teaching materials, others may just provide a generic outline utilizing the elements and principles of art, and most districts offer no curricular resources whatsoever (Link, 2019). While art educators attempt to create a curriculum that involves teaching to the standard (Chapman, 2005), there is no unified or agreed-upon curriculum or set of resources that guide elementary art education. Most art educators report that the main curricular resources they use they either make themselves or find from individual teachers’ websites, blogs, or social media platforms (The Art of Education University, 2022).

Curricular resources available to art educators fail to demonstrate the cultural complexity of artists and their artwork. Desai & Chalmers (2007) asserted that most resources, such as standards, provided at the national and state level and curricula provided by school districts propose art to be “a universal language that requires exploring a set of formalist skills, manipulating different materials and mediums, and expressing one’s understanding of the world” (p. 7). Delacruz (1996) noted at the elementary level, resources for art curricula “include a preoccupation with formal design and limited aesthetic concerns, superficial treatment of artists and their works, a lack of attention to social and cultural contexts, and an absence of difficult subject matter” (p. 89). These resources lead to art projects about artists that emphasize a particular style, element, or principle, but negate the issues their work addresses.

Curricular resources developed to remain neutral still perpetuate hegemony and oppression. And even though art has been made in thousands of ways, in thousands of places, for
thousands of years, art teachers continue to teach almost exclusively from a Western, formalist, canon (Efland et al., 1996). It perpetuates the narrative that art is about creating visual imagery that is realistic and promotes a formalist European aesthetic emphasizing conformity (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). This type of art education exists in a vacuum rarely touched by the everyday lives of students sitting in art classrooms today. We see little evidence of art education, especially at the elementary level, responding to the world that exists outside the classroom.

Section Discussion

Art educators operate in a unique hierarchy in which the opinions of other teachers and increasing administrative supervision determine how they create and deliver instructional content. Knowing the U.S. education system prioritizes accountability, efficiency, and compliance (Hanawalt, 2018) combined with an increasingly tense political climate around what educational materials ought to be taught or banned, art teachers must reckon with the fact that their work is under constant scrutiny. School culture and its value of art education will inevitably impact educators’ teaching practices and the day-to-day operations of the art classroom.

The literature presented above demonstrates a disconnect between the conflating purposes of art education and the students it is delivered to. The hyper-focus on formal elements of art and principles of design (Greer, 1984), the depiction of students as empty vessels to be filled with “correct” content knowledge, and the lack of support in terms of quality curricular resources all shape students’ experiences of learning and creating in art. As elementary art educators navigate classrooms that are constantly changing, they must ask themselves: Who does my curriculum benefit? For whom is it designed? What is important for my students to know when they leave my classroom, and why?
Contemporary scholars in art education consistently advocate for curricula and instruction that align with the identities and lived experiences of the students in the classroom (Knight & Deng, 2016). Acuff (2020) stated students should be able to “imagine and develop their futures through the art curriculum” (p. 15). While some educators embrace this type of reform, much of the art made by students in schools today still replicates the work of “old masters” from the Western canon. It prizes formalist ideals through the elements of art and principles of design to justify the art program and impress those who see the art hanging in the hallway. Further research is needed to understand how elementary art educators are making curricular choices to represent the changing demographics in the field and the various cultures of their students. By examining the efforts of scholars in the multicultural education movement, art educators can examine how to reorient art education for their students.

**Multicultural Art Education**

This section will outline the relationships between various branches of multicultural education, their shared facets, and how those facets are displayed in multicultural art education. Banks (1991b) coined the term “demographic imperative” to refer to the increasing population of people of color in the United States, and as a result, increasing populations of students of color in schools (pp. 4–5). Banks forwarded that this shift ought to ignite change within schools, universities, and the workforce to better meet the needs of their inhabitants. Yet despite this demographic imperative, art education in K–12 schooling has remained highly unchanged, demonstrated by a central focus on the elements of art and principles of design, inclination toward teacher-led projects, and cultural misrepresentation in facsimile art projects (Hanawalt, 2018). By exploring the history of the multicultural education movement and the contributions
of key art scholars in the field of art education, shared threads connect actionable steps for educators wishing to pursue a more equitable teaching practice.

**Origins of Multiculturalism**

Reform efforts in art education have roots in the multicultural education movement. Grant (2008) posited that one could argue multicultural education started when enslaved African Americans “began to educate themselves about their history in Africa and the United States and how their role and participation in these histories, as well as their racial identity, dictated their treatment in U. S. Society” (p. 2). So many other early indigenous people groups had these same experiences of learning how to interact (often by force) with people who were different from them while navigating how others positioned them in hierarchies based on race. These interactions and events of social ordering still influence our society and education system today.

The historical timeline of the multicultural education movement can be broken down into four major subparts: the intercultural movement, the intergroup movement, the civil rights movement, and the ethnic study movement (Grant, 2008). Although these events are listed consecutively, it is helpful to picture them as rhizomatic, connecting in converging and diverging ways. They are advanced with similar and conflating motives, compounded by political events taking place in the United States and throughout the world. Even though these movements are often generalized, they are perceived differently at different times by individuals and varying collective groups. The first of these links, the intercultural movement, focused on the celebratory nature of various people groups coming together. The scholars of this movement “put in place curriculum and activities in the school and community to celebrate the immigrants’ culture and contribution to society” (Grant, 2008, p. 4). Beginning in the 1930s, this movement aimed to
Americanize the influx of immigrants with the goal of a united nation. During the intergroup movement, however, proponents wanted to use the school curriculum to improve group relations by teaching assimilationist strategies (Taba & Wilson, 1946). Critics of this movement such as C. A. M. Banks (1996) felt that because the intergroup educators avoided talking with students about power and focused on “idealized aspects of culture” while making students of color seem needy, they instead “helped relegate them to the margins of society” (p. 272). Although starting to name and consider race during this time, students’ real-life experiences were not taken into consideration, nor were injustices scrutinized in the curriculum.

Throughout the civil rights movement, several educators published work addressing the shortcomings of the multicultural education movement. James Banks (1993b, 1996), a prolific multiculturalist scholar, has specifically stated throughout his work that multicultural education deals not only with race and ethnic studies but also gender, ability, class, and intersectionality. Banks’ contributions to the field of education include types of knowledge (1993a), dimensions of multicultural education (2004), and extensive discussions of implementing theory into practice. Another key scholar during this time, Ladson-Billings (1994), began to change the narratives portraying achievement, opportunity, and performance of students of color from deficit-based to asset-based. Her seminal work on culturally relevant teaching provided an in-depth case study of eight successful educators of primarily African American students. She emphasized culturally relevant attributes these educators shared: a critical view of knowledge, a collaborative view of learning, shared responsibility for the success of students, a genuine connectedness with students, and a determination that every student can succeed. In addition to these attributes, she stated, “culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.
Gay (2000) built on this work by theorizing culturally responsive teaching and forefronted her argument that educators must deal directly with controversy, study a variety of perspectives that view knowledge in different ways, and study issues through lenses of race, class, gender, and ability.

Within the last two decades, scholars have called for more critical renditions of the multicultural agenda. This includes Paris and Alim’s (2014) CSP which reinforced an asset-based mindset toward teaching and learning. Paris & Alim (2017) advocated for students to play a major role in determining curriculum and teaching practices and working towards seeing culture as a valuable resource from which to center learning experiences. Instead of seeing culture as stagnant, unchanging, and solely existing in the past, CSP “shifts toward contemporary understandings of culture as dynamic and fluid, while also allowing for the past and present to be seen as merging, a continuum, or distinct, depending on how young people in their communities live race/ethnicity, language, and culture” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 8). This way of thinking about teaching and learning places importance on the students. Their cultural stories are center-stage, and the students are active participants in the co-construction of learning in the classroom.

**Critical Multiculturalism in Art Education**

Some scholars drawing on multicultural and culturally responsive frames have written specifically for art education (Acuff, 2013a; Chin, 2016; Dewhurst, 2018; Knight, 2021; Kraehe, 2015). These authors orient their work toward a variety of audiences from preservice to elementary education. Though they use different frameworks in their research such as multiculturalism (Acuff, 2013b; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Collins & Sandell, 1992; Delacruz, 1995, 1996; Desai, 2003; A. M. Kraehe, 2010), critical multiculturalism (Acuff, 2015,
social justice art education (Desai, 2010; Dewhurst, 2018, 2019, 2022; Knight, 2021; Stuhr et al., 2008), and culturally responsive pedagogy (Acuff et al., 2012; Knight, 2015; Lai, 2012), there are shared attributes of their advocations.

**Dominant Culture in Art Education**

Educators must acknowledge and challenge the dominant culture that forms the ways of thinking and acting produced in schools (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). Wasson et al. (1990) cautioned educators to consider dominant culture because it will undoubtedly influence teachers’ attempts to dismantle narratives that uphold and reinforce it. American society is wrought with division and backlash towards movements empowering the traditionally disempowered, and the same is found in the politics of curricula, instruction, and the day-to-day operations of the school itself.

Instructional units or projects that exclusively reflect the work of European, white males reinforce a normalized dominant culture (Acuff, 2013a). When educators prioritize this reputedly superior aesthetic, it upholds student artmaking as a means of assimilation (Slivka, 2011). Not present in whitewashed, dominant narratives are the contributions and innovations of marginalized groups, such as men and women of color, people with dis/abilities, and those of the LGBTQ community (Knight, 2015). This not only confines “those whose cultural knowledge has been least revered” to fit into universalized European norms but also displaces them from accessing knowledge and power through their own cultural knowledge (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, p. 301).

Reproducing stagnant, whitewashed, and homogenized narratives of various cultures and historical events perpetuates stereotypes (Albers, 1999; Delacruz, 1996; Stuhr et al., 2008).
Students are exposed year after year to master narratives, and they either accept the information presented about various groups of people or they grow to dislike and resent the class. As cited by Albers (1999), “feminists like Greene (1988, 1995) argue that without some dialogic exchange in which students are asked to interrogate the normal, and reconstruct a different vision of their social and physical life worlds, students will continue to reproduce these ‘truths’” (p. 7). Educators must develop a critical consciousness to engage students in a dialogic exchange while also pinpointing educational resources that perpetuate stereotypes.

When trying to enact multicultural education, educators often leave out concepts like racism, injustice, oppression, discrimination, privilege, and power (Sleeter & McLaren, 2009). The term “multiculturalism” has been diluted over years of people, schools, and businesses attempting to be or sound culturally aware. Instead, art educators generalize information about other cultures into what would be considered unrecognizable to the actual artists and groups of people they attempt to teach about (Stuhr et al., 2008). As educators, especially white educators, begin to enact multiculturalism, they emphasize “safe” aspects of the term such as promoting diversity or celebrating ethnic foods and holidays (Kirker, 2017). Rarely do educators consider the effect of structural racism on the lives of their students and what the implications are for teaching, especially if they have always been afforded power and privilege because of their skin color (May, 1999). When trying to make multiculturalism more palatable by not addressing these issues, teachers and their programs “reproduce the political, economic, and social conditions that are currently practiced” (Stuhr, 1994, p. 171).

The dominant culture in art education will not be challenged by adding more artists of color to the curriculum (Collins & Sandell, 1992), but by instead “broadening our concept of what we believe is worth knowing about art” (Delacruz, 1996, p. 86). This broadening should
reveal the need to challenge the “dominant power and knowledge structures that tend to create sociocultural inequities” if we are to create a learning environment that empowers all students (Stuhr, 1994, p. 171). Several scholars have pointed out shortcomings and failures of multicultural education, but much less has been written on practical advice of how to create change in the classroom (May, 1999), or through scholarship with art educators, sharing the stories of those who do center race and critique systems of power and dominant narratives in their teaching (Acuff, 2016). As scholars attempt to rectify these shortcomings, a new wave of research on whiteness in art education reveals ways white art educators can critically examine their positions of power in the classroom.

**Whiteness**

In the United States, the majority of art educators identify as white, but the topic of whiteness and its effect on curriculum and instruction in art education are vastly under-researched (Buffington, 2019; Knight, 2006a; Link, 2019). Educators’ avoidance of confronting the reality of whiteness and white supremacy largely contributes to its prevailing power in society today (Buffington, 2019; Desai, 2010; Knight, 2006a). When considering the effects of racism in the art classroom, it is important to discuss the central aspects of whiteness.

Whiteness and white supremacy impact what constitutes “the arts,” often presenting them as white property. Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2018) posited that “the arts” can refer to traditional and not-so-traditional forms of expression, objects, and materials, while they can also be “a set of beliefs as well as discourses and discursive practices that gain meaning in specific contexts and that are shaped by power dynamics and structures of authority” (p. 14). In other words, one can call various forms of creative expression “the arts” but the very categorizing of
such processes and works is to place them in frames of understanding fixed on Eurocentrism and whiteness. For example, Gaztambide-Fernádez et al. stated that painting with oil on canvas and painting with spray paint on concrete are both forms of creative expression, however, one is easily accepted as part of “the arts,” and the other is often contested. Deciding whether or not something counts as “the arts,” in and of itself, is enveloped in whiteness. This ownership is displayed in an array of art environments (Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2018).

The overrepresentation of white, male artists in museums, schools, and curricula lends itself to the notion that white artists are superior to non-white artists (artists of color) (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). In her study of district-offered elementary art curricula, Link (2019) noticed that whiteness was consistently linked to progress with contemporary artists represented as white, while artists of color were relegated to the past in units on folk art or ancient art. Buffington (2019) found that art education posters available from Blick Art Materials (a major art education supply company) including words like “masterpiece” and “masterworks” almost exclusively represented white, male artists. This glorification of white histories and works constructs “White bodies and cultural practices as good, beautiful, and innocent and simultaneously relies on its oppositional construction of Black (non-White) bodies and cultural practices as abject, threatening, and the Other” (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018, pp. 16–17).

To combat this, Sions and Wolfgang (2021) forwarded two important pedagogical shifts to dismantle whiteness in art education. First, educators must become aware of the way whiteness has functioned in their own education and how it is perpetuated through widespread Eurocentric norms. Second, educators need to show artists’ work that addresses dominant systems such as sexism, ableism, and racism while engaging in conversations about such topics with students. To deconstruct whiteness and its effect on education, educators must establish a base for critical
consciousness and develop classroom practices that aid students in identifying hegemonic structures.

A critical multicultural agenda is impeded by the avoidance of topics such as whiteness and white supremacy. Efforts for promoting diversity and unity, for opposing discrimination and racism fail without “recognizing white supremacy as an ideological construct as well as an objective condition that reinforces hegemony” (Acuff, 2018, p. 531). If we know that the formation of schooling in the United States was oppressive to people of color for the ultimate benefit of white people, then it is critical to examine how that dynamic of power is still affecting ways of teaching, assessing, and disciplining in schools today (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Not only do the functions of school continue to uphold white norms, but white people “disproportionately occupy positions of power” helping them enforce and maintain regulations that keep them in those positions (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, p. 297).

Although one might argue there are generally good intentions behind the use of multiculturalism, it has failed in most cases to be truly anti-racist (E. Lee, 2009). Teachers who practice anti-racist pedagogy understand that their students of color carry the burden of racism daily (Tolentino, 2009), and find it their responsibility to become allies through their teaching and curriculum. Kraehe & Acuff (2021) outlined four principles that promote an anti-racist pedagogy in art education: political clarity, protective care, deep connection, and courageous witnessing. Using these principles to inform teaching, Kraehe and Acuff exhort educators to examine their awareness of societal power structures and engage with how to become agents for change inside and outside the classroom. As educators practice this engagement, they take up positions for greater connection with their students, school communities, and other educators with the same goals.
Racism

According to Yosso (2005), “deficit thinking is one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools” (p. 75). Educators fail by perpetuating deficit perspectives depicting students of color as unable to achieve at the levels of white students due to a supposed lack of support and motivation. These narratives have even been presented in art publications cautioning art educators to be aware of students with “little if any cultural enrichment, aesthetic development, or sense of achievement” (National Art Education Association, 1972, p. 43). A mindset so unchecked will continue to perpetuate narratives that depict historically marginalized people as unable to be fully empowered in the project of schooling and society in general. Though it was written over fifty years ago and the NAEA has progressed in speaking on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion in art education, it is important to expose the history and narratives that have undergirded the field. For example, deficit perspectives continue to be forwarded by district-offered curricula that depict contemporary artists as exclusively white while presenting artistic contributions by people of color as from the past (Link, 2019). Additionally, major art suppliers offering educational resources defining “master” artists include few to no artists of color (Buffington, 2019).

Educators enact covert racism when they claim to not “see” the race or ethnicity of their students, also known as color-evasive racism (Annamma et al., 2017; Wilt et al., 2022). This stems from attempts to avoid racism, resulting in difficulty engaging its history and its effects within society (Desai, 2010). Race is one of the most prominent aspects of a child’s identity, and teachers who dismiss it fail to utilize racial knowledge for planning curriculum and instruction that purportedly meets the needs of each student (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Educators may avoid the subjects of race and racism because of an assumption that elementary students are too young.
to comprehend them (Delacruz, 1996). However, to eschew or suppress discussions about race and racism indicates that art education is not neutral (Apple, 2019; Overby et al., 2022). Instead of avoiding conversations about racism, art educators must help students “develop racial literacy to identify and critique racial discourse in popular culture, media, and other sites of visual culture” (Desai, 2010, p. 24). By using art classes to promote racial literacy, teachers give students tools to create new narratives that confront hegemonic institutions.

**Power**

Analyzing and addressing the concept of power and its role in education is a central tenet of culture-centered pedagogies. Most educators who claim to use multiculturalism want their students to succeed and achieve at high levels but fail to consider that “the conditions possible for individuals’ social and cultural change are in part determined by the governing system of the nation or nations in which they live or are citizens” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, p. 7). Teaching through a lens of student culture will not be fully effective without addressing the “isms” of power in place that maintain oppression. Though some claim that students of low socioeconomic status perform more poorly in school, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) argued, “The cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism” (p. 55). Therefore, if teachers try to educate students without identifying the hegemonic systems on which our nation is built, they will continue to disempower students by denying them access to critical consciousness and therefore academic achievement. Instead, multiculturalism in practice must continually analyze “the complex relationship between subjectivity and power in relation to culture” (Desai, 2000, p. 116).
Teachers must understand how race, gender, ability, and class influence students, curricula, and the school environment (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

**Shared Attributes of Culturally Sustaining Educators**

Though scholars in art education utilize critical multiculturalism as a part of their theoretical and conceptual frameworks, very few are conducting research through the lens of CSP (Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Buffington & Day, 2018). CSP is implemented across various teaching disciplines with students of all ages, and there are four key shared attributes of educators who employ it. First, they look at culture and cultural groups as dynamic and evolving. Second, culturally sustaining art educators explore sociopolitically complex contexts of artists and their work. They examine their curricula and instructional decisions for bias with critical reflexivity. Lastly, they build intentional relationships with students, their families, and communities. Shared attributes of culturally sustaining educators can be drawn from research across subjects to provide direction for the field of art education.

**Viewing Culture as Dynamic and Actively Changing**

Culturally sustaining educators view culture as dynamic and evolving. Practices of any cultural group are not meant to be appropriated and sacred artifacts are not meant to be replicated (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Kader, 2005). Instead of trying to figure out how to represent another culture in art education, even if the aim is to do it accurately, Desai (2000) suggested we ask, “What can we know about another culture?” (p. 115). When art educators have their students try to represent another culture through their art, they often use a hegemonic, Western gaze (Chin, 2013).
Art instruction ought to demonstrate the heterogeneity and vitality of cultures by focusing on individuals and the multiple aspects of their identity (Chin, 2013). Chin (2016) used an ethnographic case study to describe the work of an art teacher implementing a contemporary Native American artists program into her curriculum. The art educator, Anna, emphasized the importance of utilizing recent photographs of the artists in her curriculum to demonstrate to students the active and contemporary nature of the artists’ being and work. Chin also discussed the teacher’s aims to lead students to understand the influences of culture, personal experiences, and environment that so heavily affect contemporary, Native American art. By demonstrating such influences as necessary to studying Native American artists and their work, Anna created a curriculum that neither antiquates nor presents culture through a Western, ethnocentric perspective.

The failures of the multicultural agenda in art education are found in the appropriation, homogenization, and misrepresentation of cultures through elementary art projects. Some common examples include projects such as African masks, Aboriginal dot paintings, Native American dream catchers, and totem poles (Acuff, 2014b, 2015, 2016; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Gude, 2013; Kader, 2005). Art teachers often fail to consider the nuance and heterogeneity of cultures (Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Link, 2019) and place them in the past, ignoring contemporary artists making work about present-day issues situated within specific sociopolitical contexts (Chin, 2016). Images of artwork and artifacts intended to inform students about a culture or cultural practices may date back decades or even hundreds of years. Although images can serve as tools for historical reference, if art educators are not also framing cultures with contemporary artists and artwork, they are perpetuating outdated and misinformed representations of people from various groups (Stuhr et al., 2008). The homogenization of
cultures does not reflect the intricacies of constantly evolving people groups. Art teachers promote misrepresentations of culture when they have their students create antiquated versions of another culture’s art (Acuff, 2014a). When students are asked to regurgitate outdated and uninformed projects from various cultures, it limits learning and the important conversations necessary for studying current topics.

**Centering Context**

By ascribing to culture as fluid, complex, and dynamic, culturally sustaining educators prioritize context when presenting information about artists and their work (Acuff, 2013a; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). When teachers implement superficial projects and attempt to teach students about “other” groups of people or places, they lack context or necessary complexity by ignoring things like historical timelines, sociopolitical influences, values, beliefs, traditions, means of communication, tensions, prominent figures, and relationships to neighboring groups (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Chalmers, 2019; Sabol, 2000). They instead focus on the most historically represented or visible traditions of a culture leading “to oversimplified or essentialist assumptions about how to bring students’ cultures into classrooms” (Bucholtz et al., 2017, p. 44). These projects also often fail to recognize the level of security and power afforded to those who appropriate when these exploitations of other cultures appear in school (Howard, 1996). Gude (2013) urged art educators to consider their intent as they guide students through art instruction and artmaking:

> If the structure of a project seems to lead inevitably to making a facsimile, not mirroring actual artistic, cultural, or spiritual practice, as is often the case in projects adapted from other cultures … the project is not actually teaching students sound disciplinary
methodologies of real artmaking and is thus actively mis-teaching the meanings, intentions, and processes of the original artists. (p. 8)

When intentional about the complexity of culture, art educators address the sociopolitical context of the art or artists they are teaching (Sabol, 2000; Stuhr, 1994). Educators who eliminate aspects of an artist’s identity or history related to political or economic issues usually want to avoid controversial material (Jeffers & Parth, 1996) and/or do not think that students can understand such issues. Instead of censoring the work, “educators can offer experiences to help students understand the root of these biases, and present opportunities for them to talk about their stereotypes” (Delacruz, 1996, p. 11). The navigation of stereotypes helps students contextualize sociopolitical issues as relevant inside and outside the classroom.

To address sociopolitical issues pertaining to the works and lives of artists, educators must examine how the sociopolitical context of the classroom itself impacts student learning (Nieto, 1999). This draws awareness to the fact that when educators or pedagogies ignore inequality at a large scale, “they assume that all students begin their educational experiences on a level playing field” (p. 192). To further explore inequity within sociopolitical contexts, educators must utilize critical reflexivity to investigate personal bias.

**Examining Bias with Critical Reflexivity**

Educators who teach with a culturally sustaining lens curiously and critically examine their position of sociocultural influence and how it affects the allocation of power in the classroom (Kraehe et al., 2015). Art educators have a responsibility to study any bias that may intentionally or unintentionally inform their decision-making regarding curricula and their students. Through work with pre-service art educators, Acuff (2014b) reflected on “how teacher
beliefs could potentially remove an entire group of people or culture from the classroom” (p.87). She argued that such power proves decisions teachers make in their classrooms are not neutral. Educators’ instructional and curricular decisions are shaped by cultural experiences (Banks, 1993a) and therefore are influenced by bias.

The process of examining bias through critical reflexivity is an ongoing process that never truly ends (Knight, 2006b). Knowing that “the field of education is directly and indirectly influenced by race and racism and educators are implicated in the struggle” ought to call attention to the responsibility educators have to question if they are using their jobs to empower all students to their full potential (Acuff, 2015, p. 31). Art educators must continuously utilize critical reflexivity to “understand how they are affected by and implicated in maintaining oppression” (Acuff, 2014b, p. 68). As teachers reflect on the impact of their own biases, beliefs, and experiences, they are more willing to consider how their pedagogies and actions affect their students. Using critical reflexivity to redirect the allocation of power away from the teacher and toward the students and their communities will help to build more effective relationships and establish mutual respect.

**Building Relationships**

To constructively practice CSP, teachers must have a thorough understanding of their students. Wong and Peña (2017) wrote about a revered high school teacher who took time to get to know his students by “learning their favorite songs, who counts as family, what types of stories they like to tell, who’s their best friend, what makes them sad, and what inspires or motivates them to come back to school each day” (p. 122). Educators who build culturally sustaining curricula do not just memorize facts about students, they create opportunities to
connect with them deeply. This looks like cultivating respect for various life experiences (Knight & Deng, 2016), connecting learning and instruction with students’ local communities (Stuhr, et al., 2008), and utilizing students’ cultural frames of reference (Gay, 2000). Teachers can consult students to help shape the curriculum (Chin, 2013) and bring communities or family members to the classroom to connect learning to real-world experiences (Kraehe, 2010). Prioritizing students’ cultural knowledge as assets for learning will help validate that what they experience outside of school is as important as what they experience in school (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Doucet, 2017). This way of thinking about teaching and learning prioritizes students and positions them as active participants in the co-construction of knowledge within the classroom.

**Seeing Students as Cultural Experts**

As educators work to build relationships, they must look to their students as cultural experts (Buffington, 2014), not vessels to fill (Freire, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the classroom this looks like “involving all students in the construction of knowledge, building on students’ personal and cultural strengths, helping students examine the curriculum from multiple perspectives … and making the culture of the classroom inclusive of all students” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 27). When a student is seen as a source of knowledge that can be utilized in the classroom, it not only reinforces his or her perception of self-worth, but it helps an entire community of students appreciate one another as valuable resources. As a result, trust is built in both student-teacher relationships and peer relationships.

**Section Discussion**

Though several theories and pedagogies fall under the umbrella of multiculturalism when enacted critically, they share core motivations and attributes. As educators build relationships
with their students, they can create curricula that engage students’ interests, experiences, and stories (Gay, 2000; Knight & Deng, 2016). Examining bias helps educators determine their blind spots and how they influence curricular choices and actions taken in the classroom. In art education, critical multicultural theories advocate for contextual information provided about artists, their work, and their cultures. Critical scholars also recommended reframing instruction about culture and cultural practices as dynamic and evolving shaped by political and societal influences (Acuff, 2013a; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

The multiculturalism enacted in classrooms today is watered-down and sanitized (Stuhr et al., 2008). Therefore, a central tenet of critical multiculturalism is the exploration of power and its role in education and society. In art education, the reproduction of a master narrative entailing the accomplishments of a singular group reinforces hierarchies and maintains oppression. To address this inequity, culturally sustaining educators must develop pedagogies that encourage students as cultural experts, break down stereotypes, and examine issues of power, racism, and whiteness in art education (Delacruz, 1996; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

A significant body of work theorizes culture-centered pedagogies, yet very little research explores what art educators do in their classrooms to enact them. The next section further explores the limitations of current elementary art curricula and the barriers they create for educators. Examining contemporary examples of art educators’ curricula and pedagogical practices offers recommendations for creating culturally sustaining curricula.

Curriculum Development

Much of the curricula used to teach art to students in the United States revolve around a Eurocentric and male-dominated canon and fail to meet the educational needs of diverse groups
of students (Crilly et al., 2020). To actualize CSP, educators must develop a culturally sustaining curriculum. By using culture as a foundation for student learning, connections, and new perspectives can be formed despite differing histories, opinions, and attitudes (Fountain & Nordlund, 2019; Hsu, 2017). Students belong at the heart of learning and all instructional decisions should center around their lived experiences (Knight, 2015). This section will focus on the varied expectations and resources for art educators when using curricula, the shortcomings of current art education curricular development, and what it looks like for educators to design culturally sustaining curricula.

Curricula in Art Education

The roles of art educators within the school context vary greatly causing curricular expectations to change within each state, city, and school, depending on the population (Knight, 2015). Each state Department of Education sets standards and policies for K–12 art instruction, and although public schools are required to follow state standards, national standards are voluntary. States can either adopt the national standards or create standards derived from them. These standards, as well as pacing guides or premade curricula, rarely have enough pluralistic content to be considered a foundation for multicultural education (Sabol, 2000). Not only do they lack multicultural content, but they erase the narratives of people of color and reinforce the master narrative.

In art education there are ample calls for curricular change but rarely are they supported with critical dialogue or action (Erickson, 2004). A possible reason for this is a fear of pushback or disciplinary action taken because of the opinions of students, teachers, or administrators (E. Lee, 2009; Simmons, 2011). According to a study done with public school art educators from
Georgia, one of the greatest areas of concern when it came to implementing contemporary social issues into the curriculum was trepidation towards negative reactions from parents/families and administrators (Milbrandt, 2002). Not only did the participating teachers fear pushback, but they also mentioned the lack of time to develop the resources and strategies needed to walk through contemporary social issues with students. Teachers’ apprehensions about being undertrained and underprepared often result in a lack of action or fear of “doing it wrong” (Erickson, 2004).

**Curricular Decisions and Their Social and Political Implications**

The conceptualization and actualization of an art curriculum is not a neutral process (Overby et al., 2022). Some schools and districts create their visual art curriculum, but it is often left up to the teacher to select which artists or techniques to teach. Decisions made to include or exclude knowledge in curricula are inherently biased and reflect the concerns of individuals and cultural groups (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). By selecting the most “valuable” knowledge students ought to know, teachers choose which “perspectives are central or marginalized, and whose interests are served or undermined” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, pp. 18–19). Critically conscious educators examine this decision-making process, considering the dissemination of knowledge and who it belongs to. They ask questions such as: “Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organized and taught in this way? To this particular group?” (Apple, 2019, p. 7). Even more, Apple (2019) emphasized the importance of not just asking these questions but understanding how the answers relate to social, economic, and political power.

Art curricula and lessons reinforcing systems of oppression silence, erase, and deculturalize the histories of artists not present in the master narrative (Acuff, 2018). Not only do traditional art curricula leave out the voices of people of color (Knight, 2006a), they avoid
controversy and dissent as key topics for study (Chalmers, 1996), both of which are essential for achieving the agenda of critical multiculturalism. When multicultural art curricula do present information or narratives from other cultures, it is “whitewashed” or presented through the dominant culture’s perspective (Kraehe et al., 2018; Sions & Wolfgang, 2021). These resources leave no place for individual narratives to come forward and end up censoring the voices from cultures they are seemingly amplifying (Acuff, 2014a). Art curricula can explore cultures in ways that make them seem exotic, especially when done superficially. If a cultural practice is reduced to a student-made consumable reproduction for an art project, it fails to educate and dishonors the original art and artist. Art educators must question if the resources and curricula they use empower students in their cultural identities or work to conform them to Western European standards (Slivka, 2011).

Not only can an art curriculum whitewash other cultures and their artistic practices, but it can promote superficial treatment of sociocultural issues or exclude them entirely. The contexts of art and artmaking have intricately complex influences, and avoiding their political nature occurs at the elementary through the collegiate level (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Even though educators attempt to enact multicultural curricula by including artists of color or giving students more opportunities to create artwork about their personal experiences and interests, they still may never discuss race, systemic racism, or oppression (Kraehe & Acuff, 2021). In a culturally sustaining curriculum, these topics must be addressed.

There is no singular narrative that can be taught to represent an entire cultural group, and teachers should be skeptical of prepackaged formulas or standardized curricular resources (Acuff, 2015; Stuhr et al., 2008). When a curriculum addresses sociocultural issues, personal narratives, and artworks from artists of color, it will constantly evolve (Stuhr et al., 2008). With
different students coming into classrooms year after year, it is impossible to expect the same lessons, projects, and assessments to be successful and relevant. Additionally, what works for one educator at one school will most likely not work in the same way for an educator at another school. Therefore, prepackaged curricula or resources will never truly fulfill the needs of a diverse group of students. Ladson-Billings (2011) argued that teachers are often too preoccupied with “what to do” when in reality, “the problem is rooted in how we think about the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, and about instruction” (p. 34). By focusing on the “why” instead of the “what” art educators can develop better awareness for spotting resources that fail to acknowledge the lived experiences of their students.

**Student-Centered Curricula**

When teachers develop a curriculum that is relevant to students’ culture, they must first explore what culture is (Sabol, 2000). Although culture can be defined in many ways, Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) defined culture as “not what people are, what people have, or even what people value; culture is what people do” (p. 226). This explanation shows just how vast culture is. Learning about various cultures through a multiplicity of narratives, sources, and people is continuous. Wasson et al. (1990) reinforced that although there is great access to cultural information through literature on the internet or in text, anthropological approaches are the best way to gain cultural insight, especially to share with others. Such approaches include “talking to people, listening, observing, recording, interacting, checking responses, and constantly referring responses to the cultural context in which this interaction occurs” (Wasson et al., 1990, p. 237). This is mostly incongruent with the way teachers are expected to provide information to students. They often teach students in ways that help them master standards and
objectives as quickly as possible, leaving little time for deep exploration or reflection. Learning about culture is less like a task to check off a list, and more of a way of living by orienting attitudes, resources, and time toward others.

A culturally sustaining curriculum centers information that is personally relevant to students in the classroom. When teachers value students’ cultural knowledge, they work to find ways to build curricula, objectives, and projects around that knowledge (Acuff, 2016). However, it is common in elementary art education to see a majority of teacher-led projects that involve students copying what the teacher models. These types of projects include directed steps from beginning to end, resulting in “cookie-cutter” products that all look the same. When art teachers have students create projects that are mainly teacher-prescribed, they are not only taking away an opportunity for students to think critically and creatively, but they also fail to utilize information about their students that may be engaging (Gude, 2013). If teachers truly ask themselves why students need to know what they are teaching, they may question the motivations behind their curricular decisions and whom they serve (Buffington, 2014).

Another aspect of formatting culturally sustaining curricula is to prioritize students critically analyzing the information they receive. Banks (1993a) affirmed students must learn that the curriculum they participate in and the knowledge they are presented with at school have been assembled by others. Students have the right to form ideas and opinions about that knowledge and what may be missing from the curricula. Questioning authority figures such as teachers can be seen as a negative and unwanted practice in the classroom but encouraging students to question and contribute information to teachers’ blind spots will help create a more equitable classroom (Acuff, 2016).
Challenges to Building Culturally Sustaining Curricula in Art Education

Several obstacles make it difficult for elementary art teachers to design and implement a culturally sustaining curriculum. Generally, art teachers in elementary schools see hundreds of students a week, making it nearly impossible to know each child deeply. Collaboration can be difficult if educators teach alone at their schools or if they have extremely limited planning time. Art educators are rarely offered opportunities for relevant professional development, let alone supported in the work of building critical consciousness and manifesting it in their teaching.

Curriculum planning through the lens of CSP is a collaborative process, yet many elementary schools have only one art educator (Borrero et al., 2018; Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Crilly et al., 2020; Ploof & Hochtritt, 2018; Puzio et al., 2017). Unless the teacher has other resources outside of the school, they are planning alone. Ploof and Hochtritt (2018) orchestrated a professional development opportunity in which art educators collaboratively formed ideas for art curricula based on the artwork of contemporary artists. During the session, groups of educators identified big ideas and probing questions inspired by contemporary artists’ work and further elaborated on how to use instruction to promote social justice through art. Ploof and Hochtritt’s claims about the lack of time and content provided to art teachers for professional development demonstrated why collaboration is necessary when attempting to develop a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Elementary art educators teach on average 300–400 students per week making it nearly impossible to deeply know each student. If a central component of CSP is to have enough knowledge of students to create curricula that sustain students’ lifeworlds and cultures, how is it possible with hundreds of children? Elementary art teachers may also only see their students for 30–60 minutes a week making decisions on how to allocate class time difficult. Although there
is hardly any research that analyzes this specific problem and context, some scholars have discussed the use of student choice and voice in classroom settings to learn more about students’ interests in the time they do have together (Gross, 2020; Overby, 2022; Poskas, 2020). These concepts will be further explored in the next section of the literature review on student voice.

Teachers’ continual search to understand and meet the needs of their students must be supplemented with the deep work of exploring personal bias. This is often the foundation for real change to occur within teachers’ pedagogical practices (Acuff, 2016). There is a call from art teacher educators to place this practice at the center of preservice education, giving students opportunities to critically reflect on race relations and how they will navigate them in the classroom (Kraehe, 2015). Educators must understand systems of oppression to call out projects or curricula that reproduce hegemonic narratives (Acuff, 2014b). Just like students, teachers carry “understandings, concepts, explanations, and interpretations to the classroom that result from their experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures” (Banks, 1993, p. 12). Because it is impossible for teachers to fully separate themselves from these experiences, they must learn to navigate the ways their culture will coincide or collide with their students’ cultures. By developing their critical consciousness, educators see how longstanding practices and projects in art education homogenize cultures and reproduce systems of oppression (White, 2004). This conscientization leads to the development of positionalities that transform curricular choices and interactions with students in the art room (Acuff, 2013a; Knight & Deng, 2016).

Section Discussion

Designing and implementing curricula is an intensely complicated process with no singular solution. Because so few art educators are supplied with a specific art curriculum, there
are many decisions made about what and how to teach. The literature demonstrated several reasons for this context: different expectations for art educators from administrators, parents/families, and peers (Hanawalt, 2018); limited curricular resources (Link, 2019); a diverse set of students in each class taught; varying budgets, supplies, and space; and complex teacher identities with differing backgrounds and uniquely personal experiences. Additionally, just as “culture” itself is constantly evolving (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013), so too should curricula based on student culture.

Though often uncomfortable to explore, educators must acknowledge that no matter what they choose to teach, their decision-making is “a political and moral process” (Apple, 2019, p. 111). In surveys conducted by the Art of Education University over the past several years, art educators have ranked “cultural responsiveness” and “student-centered learning” highly as initiatives they would like to learn more about and implement into their teaching (The Art of Education University, 2022). However, educators have also expressed fear of disciplinary action regarding teaching content that is viewed as “too political” or hesitation about teaching culturally sustaining curricula the wrong way (E. Lee, 2009; Simmons, 2011). Critically, these choices in art education either work to uphold the status quo of Western formalist techniques and “old masters” or they attempt to work against them.

Art educators must learn how to navigate the privilege and barrier of educating hundreds of students each week by utilizing curricula and class time to learn about their students through their artwork. As educators work to develop pedagogies and curricula that are culturally sustaining, they must gain a thorough understanding of their students’ lives. As teachers actively engage with their students, they begin to learn about the nuances of their likes and dislikes, their family members, and how they feel about what is happening around them. Tuning into the depths
of students’ identities will start to shape what educators view as critical for students to learn. Dewhurst (2018) stated, “While there is still certainly much to learn about curriculum design, assessment, human development, and reflective practice, none of this will matter if educators cannot connect with their students” (p. xviii). In the next section, I will explore how student voice is a key component of that connection.

**Student Voice**

The concept of voice is long established in the work of critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). As student voice is formed and developed, it is determined by external factors within cultural, political, and economic contexts (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). In education, student voice can be defined as “the initiating force in an inquiry process which invites teachers’ involvement as facilitating and enabling partners in learning” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201). If the framework of CSP calls for centralizing students’ interests, lived experiences, and communities, art educators must engage student voice to create meaningful and impactful learning opportunities. This section will entail how art educators engage students in using voice to name concealed stories, dismantle master narratives, and build connections through art.

**Utilizing Student Voice in the Classroom**

Educators who utilize student voice as an element of culture-centered pedagogies often see students as knowledge producers and culture makers, validating their funds of knowledge (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Overby et al., 2022). Instead of looking at students as empty vessels to be poured into, culturally sustaining educators acknowledge the power youth have as...
the next generation of leaders. When educators put aside the notion of superiority in the
classroom, it allows space for knowledge to be constructed alongside students (Acuff et al.,
2012). This positioning encourages students to bring forward their experiences and interests into
the classroom, reshaping the curriculum.

As student voice is formed and developed, it is determined by external factors within
cultural, political, and economic contexts (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Giroux &
McLaren, 1986). Educators who honor student voices use narrative for reflection and understand
the complexity of the “intense struggle among different groups over what will count as
meaningful and whose cultural capital will prevail in legitimating particular ways of life”
(Giroux, 1986, p. 50). Popularized narratives in art education have long been dictated by the
voices of middle and upper-class, white males, limiting the voices of traditionally marginalized
groups (Acuff, 2013a; H. Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Kraehe, 2015). Acknowledging this context
inevitably shapes the environment in which students express their voices, dreams, and opinions.
Educators must be aware that they do not “give” a voice to others, but they play a role in making
sure student voices are heard (Chalmers, 2019).

Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment

Creating space for student voice in the art room is key to practicing CSP. By focusing on
the lives of students, teachers should be able to form curricula that are culturally sustaining.
Buffington and Bryant (2019) emphasized the importance of creating assignments that allow
students to share personal narratives as well as a space to listen and have open discussions with
peers. The willingness to share personal information must come from an environment
orchestrated to allow for such opportunities by building trust, honesty, and a caring nature toward others.

Educators play a major role in constructing spaces of learning that foster belonging, risk-taking, and authenticity (Filbin, 2021; Gross, 2020; Willcox, 2017; Van Katwyk & Seko, 2019). In her research on students with emotional dis/abilities, Gross (2020) explored the increase in social interactions due to participation in high school visual arts classes. She found students responded best to instruction related to their personal experiences and interests while getting to create artwork with the freedom to make their own decisions. During interviews, students reported feeling safe within the classroom environment and enjoyed the relaxed nature and personal orientation of the projects. In addition to providing student choice within the curriculum, teacher-student relationships proved to be essential for creating a learning environment in which students feel a sense of acceptance and belonging (Filbin, 2021; Gross, 2020; Pierce 2020).

Letting go of traditional teaching hierarchies engages students in controlling their artwork production and narratives. Filbin (2021), who identified her positionality as a white, middle-class woman and a high school art teacher for underserved students, discussed attempts to create a safe, inclusive space for her students to create artwork and express their voices. She talked about the necessity of letting go of traditional teaching structures and allowing the students to control their artwork production and narratives. Honesty, vulnerability, and taking the back seat during critiques and conversations in her classroom opened up opportunities to learn from her students and lead them to produce personally meaningful art.

When vulnerability is fostered as a gateway for producing creativity and promoting exploration, students feel more freedom to create. According to Willcox (2017), an art classroom
is a place that can produce feelings of shame and inadequacy if it is not oriented to make students feel psychologically safe. Willcox encouraged the use of visual journals to allow opportunities for noticing details, developing relationships, and engaging in dialogue. Creating a psychologically safe space in the art classroom goes hand in hand with CSP because if a student is going to participate and willingly engage in art that tells personal stories and utilizes voice, they must sense belonging and acceptance.

The process of creating a “safe” environment in the art classroom is not straightforward, nor is it interpreted the same by all students. Spillane (2015) quoted Leonardo and Porter (2010) by stating, “Although I tried to create a safe atmosphere for discussing race in art education, I failed to understand that a ‘safe space [rarely] exists for people of color when it concerns public race dialogue’” (p. 64). To implement culture-centered pedagogies that create critical consciousness while disrupting dominant narratives and hegemonic practices, there will at times be disappointment, tension, uncomfortability, and risk for students and teachers. Leonardo and Porter (2010) clarified one goal of having critical conversations about race and power is not to create a hostile environment, but that “pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power” (pp. 139–140). As educators attempt to navigate these environments, they must continually examine their critical consciousness and positions of power in relation to their students, using the process of education to come alongside their students in making change.

**Voice to Resist and Transform**

Although K–12 art educators may not always have the freedom to create their curricula, they can utilize student voices by critiquing prescribed curricula and supplementing them with
student knowledge (Acuff, 2015; Krahe, 2010). As educators walk students through the process of dismantling master narratives, they can use personal and cultural stories for “resistance and transformation” (Acuff, 2016, p. 8). Acuff (2020) utilized Afrofuturism in her curricula to engage students in envisioning their futures by teaching “a unit that is conceptually futuristic, situated in fantasy, myth, and imagination but that utilizes traditional African diasporic artmaking processes” (p. 20). She denoted the complexity of the African Diaspora while allowing students, especially Black students, to envision themselves in the future untouched by colonialism and oppression. As students tell their stories or point out the places where certain voices are missing, they are empowered.

Engaging student narratives allows both educators and students to understand their roles within dominant systems and explore how they are affected by them (Acuff, 2016). Oftentimes, when educators initially do the work of understanding bias and developing critical consciousness in their teaching, they neglect the power of student voice in the transformation of their teaching and the overall classroom environment (Nieto, 1999). As students reflect on their participation within dominant systems they are permitted to “revise normalized narratives and modify universalized truths” allowing individuals to use their cultural frames of reference for learning and filtering information (Acuff, 2014a, p. 312). By doing this, students create connections not only with the subject matter but with one another.

**Voice to Create Connections**

As students engage their voices in the classroom and forefront their cultural experiences to shape the curriculum, it establishes connection. Art teacher Janelle Constance talked about her lifelong exposure to the Western canon in elementary school, during pre-service training, and
working as an art educator (Overby et al., 2022). Even though Constance identified as an African American woman, the exposure had become normalized, and therefore largely encompassed her curriculum as she started teaching. It was her students who voiced the lack of relatability to the artists centered in her curriculum which included traditionally celebrated artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh, and Michelangelo. By contemplating how to connect her students’ lived experiences to their art education by creating a new curriculum, a transformation occurred. Overby et al. (2022) stated:

In finding and sharing artists from diverse cultures and backgrounds, my students began seeing the value in their experiences. They began to see the beauty in their story amidst the struggles they were facing. These experiences of beauty and struggle were celebrated by the artists we explored. Students related. They connected. We connected. My students enter my classroom knowing their voices are valued and their experiences matter. They walk out of my classroom knowing their story is sacred and respected. (p. 24)

Teachers must ask students what they value, and further, show them that their answers are important enough to shape what happens in the classroom. This type of influence, ownership, and mutual respect allows for continued insight into students’ communities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) and builds a foundation for discussions on complex issues like power, race, gender, and ability (Albers, 1999).

Universal prompts for artmaking create opportunities for connection among students. Poskas (2020) invited an artist, Mohammad Hafez, to talk with her students and collaborate on a project exploring the concept of home and houselessness. Hafez, a Muslim American immigrant to the United States, emphasized the loss of his home as a critical component of his art. Using the artist’s experiences as a platform for exploring “home” allowed students to engage their own
stories, some including immigration, divorce, and service in a refugee camp. Poskas (2020) relayed that when select students realized they shared stories of varying proximity to displacement, they were able to forge meaningful connections. The consideration of the concept of “home” allowed students to make personal connections while exploring similarities and differences in their experiences.

Projects That Demonstrate Student Voice

Curation-based projects foster student voice and provide insight into what students constitute as meaningful. Fountain and Nordlund (2019) used the Mystery Vessel and the Personal Identity Museum for their students to unpack their identities. For both projects, students curated a collection of objects that represented various aspects of their identities. Students had to consider not only the placement of items, but how the viewers would examine, interpret, and interact with the project. For some students, this included the viewers having to physically open a box or turn pages to reveal personal items. Adaptable to most age groups, this project gave students a chance to tell stories through meaningful objects to build respect, connection, and understanding among classmates. After surveys had been completed at the end of this course, students reported a tone of respect and a stronger sense of community within the class after completing this project.

Using a spiral curriculum model allows educators to gradually increase in complexity and depth, building on student input over time. Hsu (2017) centered her art education courses around culture using a spiral curriculum model. The first assignment required her students to bring in objects that signified the visual culture of both personal meaning and narratives from their everyday lives. To increase conceptual complexity, the second project focused on how students
could use various artistic styles to reimagine the personal items from the first project. As a final project, Hsu had her students create a three-dimensional cultural diorama and self-portrait that represented a story about their heritage they wanted to share with peers. The students had time to reflect and discuss with one another creating and recreating conceptions about culture and its role in the classroom using voice.

Virtual art instruction due to COVID-19 has been a prime example of educators adapting to student needs and re-engaging with what is most important. Overby (2022) described how her students’ loss and feelings of depression and disorientation were the impetus for restructuring her curriculum while teaching from home. Instead of starting with a technical skill and applying it to a project, she allowed the students to decide what they wanted to communicate and then use whatever they had at home to develop technical skills. For example, Overby designed a project that encouraged students to visualize their emotional states in which they responded with anxieties and doubts about the safety of their families and how they would readjust to life at the end of quarantine. She found that by doing this the students’ work “was more authentic and expressive” than what she had seen in the past (p. 49). Overby prioritized connecting with her students over producing work for art shows and competitions. She concluded that “allowing students to have more voice and choice in their artmaking practice and letting go of what we as teachers think they should be doing has opened our minds to new possibilities” (p. 49). This responsiveness to students’ lives, feelings, and needs curated deeper connections and more meaningful art projects.


**Section Discussion**

As educators engage in developing culturally sustaining teaching practices and student-centered curricula, they re-orient from viewing themselves as gatekeepers of knowledge toward students as culture and knowledge producers. In art education, this looks like shifting from teacher-led projects to providing students with choices and opportunities for them to “speak” through their art. Instead of accumulating and regurgitating outdated and culturally homogenizing project ideas, teachers must ask themselves what is “worth knowing” as their students progress in their art education (Delacruz, 1996).

To foster an art classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, opinions, emotions, and desires, educators must first demonstrate authenticity, engagement, and connection (Filbin, 2021; Willcox, 2017). By designing projects that mine for students’ cultural knowledge like gold, educators prove the value and respect they have for their students. Importantly, if educators aim to foster a space that promotes critical consciousness, they are not afraid to break down stereotypes, sociopolitical identities, and the hierarchies of power that exist in society which can cause discomfort to those who benefit from such power (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

There is no specific formula for a curriculum that centers student voice, yet key points can be drawn from art educators practicing culturally sustaining teaching. Teachers promoting voice in the classroom explore artists with similar funds of knowledge to their students (Overby et al., 2022). Educators call out master narratives that marginalize and oppress, using student counternarratives as a form of resistance (Acuff, 2016). Lastly, art educators are receptive to students’ evolving needs and respond with flexibility to change the direction of instruction due to the expression of student voice (Overby, 2022).
Literature Review Discussion

The purpose of this literature review has been to name the functions and failures of the current state of elementary art education, necessitate CSP as a means of pedagogical transformation, and foreground the lives of students in creating culturally sustaining curricula. In elementary art education specifically, there is a lack of research on the practices of teachers in their curriculum development and enactment within the classroom. By looking at the histories of major movements in multicultural education, I have set the stage to reveal how art scholars are calling for reform in art education at all levels. By naming specific attributes of culturally sustaining educators and spotlighting their curricular choices, I have made recommendations for practice and foregrounded the importance of student-centered learning. To provide learning environments that are centered around students, educators must develop authentic relationships, question the knowledge most valued in school settings, and view students as producers of culture. This leads to an increased value of student voice and engagement with students as leaders in their learning.

My experiences in the classroom and my exploration of research on art education in this literature review have prompted key questions: If elementary art education sets the stage for secondary and university-level art instruction, why is it under-researched? Why is there virtually no research on elementary-specific art projects designed using CSP? There is plenty of criticism on the practices of elementary art educators in the ways their curriculum perpetuates stereotypes, homogenizes cultures, and lacks contextual clarity, but where is the research that points out what culturally sustaining elementary art educators are doing right? How can the stories and experiences of elementary art educators reveal ways to navigate occupational barriers and design culturally sustaining curricula? The next section will detail the methodology of a multi-case
study exploring the experiences of five elementary art educators as they share their experiences designing culturally sustaining curricula. By interviewing the participants about their personal experiences and teaching philosophies, observing their teaching, and examining their instructional materials, I make connections and shed light on how elementary art educators embody CSP in ways that empower students through the use of student voice.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework draws together three areas of literature: CSP, critical consciousness, and engaged pedagogy. These areas together allow me to navigate elementary art educators’ experiences of conceptualizing culturally sustaining curricula, their points of entry and journeys through critical consciousness, and the physical practice of enacting engaged pedagogy. Each of these areas has a focus on socially constructed knowledge and will provide a structure for analyzing elementary art educators’ curricular decision-making concerning the social, political, and cultural influences affecting their work.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

The goal of CSP is to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, the three core elements of CSP are acknowledging linguistic and cultural dexterity as necessary to access the power that accompanies cultural pluralism, viewing culture as dynamic and active, and engaging both the problematic and progressive aspects of cultural production from students and their communities. Culturally sustaining pedagogies work in education to dismantle oppression by forwarding “pluralist outcomes that are not centered on White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural norms of educational achievement” (p. 95).
CSP has roots in resource pedagogies (Ball, 1995; C. D. Lee, 1995; Moll & González, 1994), but works to critique shortcomings in contemporary educational research. As scholars worked to combat deficit perspectives of students who fell outside of white norms, they encouraged the inclusion of students’ cultural identities and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) as vital resources for learning, but often towards assimilationist goals. Based on Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b) and Gay’s Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000), Paris and Alim identify limitations stating that “responsiveness” and “relevancy” do little to forward the goal of sustaining heritage and contemporary practices of culture enacted by students and their families (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Though this work is relatively new, examples from the field can shed light on how CSP functions as a conceptual framework.

CSP centers students’ funds of knowledge and lived experiences to drive curricular decisions. When inviting local artist and high school alum Jordan Casteel to talk about her work, Overby et al. (2022) embodied CSP by challenging their students to formulate questions for the interview. The discussions centered around Casteel’s use of personal experiences to inspire her work which depicts her racial identity and demonstrates “how artistic voice develops in part from the localized environment” (p. 22). Casteel was a source of inspiration for Marin Griffith, a talented high schooler, encouraged by her school district to create a mural for the community in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police. Griffith’s mural worked in part to sustain culture by focusing on creating something “overtly Black and intentionally bold,” choosing to depict the figures in “positions of connection, love, intimacy and kindness” (p. 22). Because the educators worked to “reimagine art education as a practice of freedom” their students were able to use their funds of knowledge to create counternarratives during a time of increased racial tension (p. 24).
Culturally sustaining pedagogies in practice necessitate the intersectionality of identity. Coppola et al. (2019) explored seventh-grade students’ decisions to center “dis/ability” in a poetry unit designed with CSP and universal design for learning (UDL). By using CSP as a theoretical lens, participating educator, Mr. C., was able to draw “on the literate, cultural, and personal knowledge of their students” and “encourage students to showcase the hybridized and fluid nature of their identities” (p. 244). Mr. C also used class time to complicate the use of labels when defining exceptionalities in school in preparation for student writing. This implementation of CSP shows how students can “critique dominant deficit narratives in schools as they (re)write and (re)claim their stories” (p. 229).

Wong and Peña (2017) discussed the work of an educator, Mr. Just, utilizing CSP as a theoretical framework to analyze his work with students in a performing arts group called the Courageous Writers. Mr. Just incorporated CSP through an engaged understanding of his students’ interests, using critical reflexivity to examine stereotypes in his teaching practice, and focusing on artistic traditions most valued by his students. Rather than limiting the content of student performances to interests perceived as “safe” within the school context, Mr. Just challenged the Courageous Writers to connect their work to inequities they faced as students of color in over-policed neighborhoods. He demonstrated the nuance of creating art for social justice by engaging his students in discussions of “when, why, and how a particular piece of art might be hurtful to others, or on the flip side, helpful toward collectively thinking thorough or addressing an issue facing their community” (p. 124). Mr. Just effectively used CSP to guide students in their artistic expressions while acknowledging the complexity of work that addresses injustice.

Using CSP as part of my conceptual framework provides a guide to examine specific practices of educators working to develop student-centered curricula and aid students in
addressing inequity in their artwork. To explore elementary art educators’ implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogies, it is necessary to understand their frame of reference for sociopolitical contexts and factors influencing the act of teaching. Critical consciousness serves as the second component of my conceptual framework to examine the participants’ journeys to sociopolitical consciousness and desires for educational justice.

**Critical Consciousness**

Utilizing critical consciousness as the second lens of my conceptual framework will help investigate how art educators understand oppression and injustice within society and how they live out that understanding through critical action in teaching and curriculum design (Freire, 1970). Based on Friere’s (1970) work, Heberle et al. (2020) define critical consciousness as “an individual’s awareness of oppressive systemic forces in society, a sense of efficacy to work against oppression, and engagement in individual or collective action against oppression” (p. 525). Largely absent in preservice training and continued education of teachers are opportunities for critical reflection, the naming of injustice within oppressive institutions, and the study of how it affects the process of teaching and learning in today’s classrooms (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Therefore, teachers do not have sustained dialogue or “linguistic tools” that help them develop critical consciousness (de Saxe & Trotter-Simons, 2021). Inspired by Friere through the work of other scholars, three key components for conscientization guide this section: the denunciation of dehumanizing structures in society, a life-long state of learning about oppressive and marginalizing institutions and personal roles within them, and the creation of the classroom as a liberatory space for cultural action.

Friere (1970) acknowledged that “there can be no conscientization of the people without a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by the proclamation of a new
reality to be created by men [sic]” (p. 471). Dialogue and action are necessary for social transformation. By using the classroom as a space to dismantle Eurocentric norms and name the functions of racism, sexism, classism, and their perpetuation within society, students and teachers can work to create “linguistic tools … to name problems which were previously unnamed, and to develop a moving language for talking about them in the context of the wider institution and society which the classroom is located” (de Saxe & Trotter-Simons, 2021, p. 13).

This gradual social, political, and cultural awareness and development of critical consciousness provide a foundation for students to enter into a continued state of learning and acting for social justice.

Critical consciousness is a state of sustained learning about prescribed realities for liberation and transformative social action (Freire, 1970; Kohli et al., 2019). In their study, Kohli et al. (2019) interviewed women of color about what sustained their teaching for social justice. The educators named a holistic approach to critical consciousness that was not limited to their teaching pedagogies but was a “fundamental part to their ways of understanding and being in the world” (p. 25). The educators embodied critical pedagogies that led them to utilize their personal experiences of discrimination and resistance as assets for teaching. They also found ways to sustain their learning beyond the professional development opportunities provided by their districts.

Similar to an artist conceptualizing an artwork, Merrnick (2021) stated that to develop critical consciousness is to “aim to observe our world closely, reflect on what we see, envision alternate ways of being, and engage in a continuous cycle of judging and revising our world toward these goals” (p. 19). To aid students in this development, Merrnick structured her curriculum to scaffold learning gradually for her students. She used portraiture lessons as opportunities for students to portray the stories of immigrants as counternarratives and helped
her students explore the media’s role in perpetuating stereotypes during a graphic design unit. She implemented a cumulative project where students explored various aspects of their identities to understand how they inhibit spaces of power and privilege. Merrnick stated that conscientization is the impetus for her work with students and encouraged all art educators “to transform … classrooms into liberatory spaces where students are supported in recognizing, processing, and challenging systems of oppression” (p. 20). By doing this art educators demonstrate the agency students have to make change.

Critical consciousness is a necessary trait of educators developing and enacting critical pedagogies. As teachers build awareness of hegemony and its role in the education system, they garner a more nuanced approach to providing spaces for students’ self-actualization and agency. I chose to intersect critical consciousness with engaged pedagogy to understand the relationship between knowing and being: knowing the change that needs to occur in education and being in the classroom with students, attuned to their visions and passions for change.

**Engaged Pedagogy**

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) theorized engaged pedagogy as a way of educating that values students’ intellectual and spiritual growth. Instead of classrooms as places to learn rote information, engaged pedagogy envisions learning environments where students’ lived experiences provide the foundation to examine topics like race, gender, dis/ability, and class. The act of coming together as teacher and students, with shared responsibility for learning and self-actualization, creates a “sacred location where knowledge becomes action and students become change agents about the things that
matter to them” (Maniglia, 2022, p. 241). As teachers implement hook’s engaged pedagogy, they live out educating as a practice of freedom.

Engaged pedagogy draws together several themes relevant to the act of “being” an educator and co-creating knowledge for transformation. First, creating an environment based on the lived experiences of students foregrounds the reality of “each classroom as different” and “strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (hooks, 1994, pp. 10–11). This means educators must understand how to operate and grow in settings that are always evolving. Instruction and curricula that remain stagnant will continually fail to engage students, denying the power of their individualized and unique cultural capital. Teaching to transgress, creating dynamic learning opportunities that spark joy, passion, and excitement (Hinds, 2021; Phelps-Ward et al., 2021), and teaching to students’ whole souls provide “the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p.13).

A second fundamental concept of engaged pedagogy is reciprocity. Rarely is the act of teaching conceptualized in a way that demonstrates a shared responsibility with mutual benefit between student and educator. Freire (1973) flipped traditional school hierarchies by stating, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 67). When power is shared, the oppressor/oppressed dynamic shifts from the teacher as all-knowing and students as receptacles, to a relationship in which each participant is seen as having valuable knowledge and experiences necessary for the education of all. This relationship creates an “egalitarian learning environment in which the distinction between experts and non-experts is deconstructed and expertise becomes experienced and
humanised” (Greenwood-Hau, 2021, p. 13). From this place of humanization, educators and students can critique systems of oppression, starting the process of self-actualization.

hooks’ spiritual and existential component of engaged pedagogy, based on the work of Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, centers on teachers’ and students’ wholeness and healing. As educators navigating virtual instruction at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Phelps-Ward et al. (2021) created spaces through Zoom for deep care and love by encouraging students to share their emotions and experiences. The spaces not only provided room for students to process their worry and fear in a time full of unknowns, but they were a place to connect, heal, and “see” one another in the telling and valuing of each other’s stories. In theorizing engaged pedagogy as healing, Sevilla (2016) stated:

If a teacher is not merely giving information but opening up real problems shared by both teacher and student and creating a space to cultivate criticality, then the teacher is not merely connecting with the intellectual life of the student but with the entire human being he/she is faced with. The teacher is caring for the whole student as he/she wrestles with reality, a dynamic of the spirit that has corporeal, volitional, and affective components in addition to mere cognitive ones. (p. 134)

Educators must understand that teaching students is a holistic process built on a foundation of meaningful relationships. Yet, through the lens of engaged pedagogy, the purpose of building relationships is not just to know one another for the sake of connection, but to transgress the boundaries of difference in the classroom to co-create as social agents of change (Maniglia, 2022). By crossing boundaries such as race, gender, class, power, and privilege to fully engage in learning and being in the classroom, education becomes an act of freedom (hooks, 1994).

Engaged pedagogy rounds out my conceptual framework because it addresses a holistic lens of education, prioritizing teachers and students as both whole and human. By forging new
structures of power in the classroom, leveraging student knowledge and experiences, and positioning learning as an act of resistance to structural oppression, educators will teach to transgress. By tying together CSP, critical consciousness, and engaged pedagogy, I hope to construct a framework that centers “the personal and collective so that they may be interpreted more meaningfully for informing the social action” (de Saxe & Trotter-Simons, 2021, p. 13).
Chapter Three: Methodology

This case study addresses the lack of CSP in the curricula used by art educators across the United States by examining how elementary art educators design opportunities to center student culture and voice through instructional content, strategies, and materials. The goal of this research was to clearly define and analyze what decisions art educators made while creating curricula that they consider culturally sustaining. The literature review from the previous chapter included the areas of elementary art education, multicultural art education, curriculum development, and student voice. Based on this collection of literature, there is still a gap in understanding how elementary art educators consider resources for building their curricula through the lens of CSP and what instructional materials they use in the classroom. To address this gap, this study utilized interviews, observations, and artifacts to investigate the curricular decision-making processes of five elementary art educators.

This study explored the intricacies of culturally sustaining, elementary art educators’ curricular decisions while also examining their navigation of structural barriers. The social, cultural, economic, and political influences affecting educators are vast, inherently shaping what occurs in the classroom. Therefore, not only asking the question of what culturally sustaining educators are doing, but how their ideologies, philosophies, and dreams for justice motivate their decisions as culturally sustaining pedagogues, is critical to this work. By interviewing educators about their teaching context and philosophy and observing the embodiment of their pedagogy, this case study offers multiple representations of what it looks like to be a culturally sustaining elementary art teacher.

To begin this chapter, I discuss the selection of a multiple-case study framed within qualitative research, then describe settings and participants addressing why the art educators were chosen for the study and under what criteria. I describe data collection methods and
procedures to depict how interviews, observations, and documentation based on case study research in education fit the purpose of this study. Following the timeline of data collection, I outline processes used for coding and thematic analysis. This section concludes with my positionality, ethical considerations, and strategies utilized for achieving trustworthiness and rigor.

**Qualitative Research**

This research utilized a case study design to gain perspective on how elementary art educators form curricula in a way that promotes opportunities for student voice. Characteristics of qualitative research made it possible to explore how the participants’ experiences and thoughts affected how they planned their art curriculums, providing a lens for how participants constructed realities and made meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Because no singular solution exists for creating culturally sustaining curricula, the methods utilized in qualitative research fit the social inquiry process of this study. I was not looking to verify “a predetermined idea” but wanted to allow space to discover new insights through the interviews and observations conducted with the participants (Sherman & Webb, 2005, p. 5). This required a methodology that allowed for and acknowledged emic perspectives, multiple constructed realities, and the flexibility to select strategies for pursuing research questions. Additionally, qualitative methodology was fitting for this study because it encouraged me to critically examine my role, culture, background, and experiences and how they shaped the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
Case Study

I utilized a holistic multiple-case study design for this research (Yin, 2018). Because the search for participants was nationwide, each art educator exists as a case within their teaching context. Case studies in the field of education often focus on people and programs, and this study focuses on elementary art educators and the way they structure their curriculum for their school’s art program (Stake, 1995). Stake defined the case as “a specific, a complex, functioning thing” and an “integrated system” (p. 2). His definition is relevant to the study because the act of teaching and developing curricula is incredibly context dependent. Students, parents/families, administrators, staff members, facilities, materials, funding, state-mandated curricula, teachers’ beliefs, personal experiences, and training (formal and informal) all have effects on the process of curriculum development. A case study methodology allowed for the examination and analysis of this complexly interrelated system starting from “broad exploratory beginnings” and concluding with detailed interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 54).

The individual cases for this study are five elementary school art teachers from across the U.S. who consider themselves culturally sustaining educators. I collected data using interviews, observations, and artifacts such as lesson plans and student projects. Because there are so many ways that CSP can be implemented in the design of curriculum, I represent the differing views of how to construct curriculum by examining the cases in unobtrusive ways, rather than generalizing the data through blanket statement recommendations for practice (Stake, 1995).

As a teacher-researcher, my role in the collection of data throughout this study was and continues to be entangled as I present the content that culturally sustaining educators implemented in their classrooms. Through interactions with the participants, I learned about the educators’ decision-making processes while attempting to put aside any preconceived assumptions (Stake, 1995). Schramm (1971) argued, “the central tendency among all types of
case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p. 6). In this case study, I aimed to present the art educators’ decisions to offer insight into the current state of the field of art education and depict the continued state of learning required to develop a culturally sustaining teaching pedagogy.

**Participants and Context**

I recruited participants for this study from across the United States. I cast this net widely because of the small population of educators who met the inclusion criteria. After trying to pilot this study with a group of elementary art educators within a southeastern metropolitan city and failing to gather the needed participants, I realized that the art teachers within the city who understood CSP and had the willingness to commit their time were extremely limited. The decision of where to solicit participants was not bound to a specific school district or city but instead prioritized finding educators who had the background, content knowledge, and passion for the work at the heart of this study.

**Recruitment**

To obtain participants for this case study, I utilized purposeful sampling. Because I wanted to work with elementary art educators who understand CSP, my goal was to find cases that are information-rich regarding the topic, also known as “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Participants had to meet the following criteria:

- Art educators must currently teach at an elementary school with at least three years of experience in elementary art education
- Art educators must use CSP in their instruction and curriculum design
Because the teaching context of an elementary art teacher is different from a general education teacher or a pre-service teacher, selecting art educators who have taught for at least three years and currently still teach at the elementary level produces knowledge on the most current implementations of CSP for children through art education. I relied on the participants to illustrate what a culturally sustaining educator looks like; therefore, the educators helped determine what topics were most important for the inquiry of the study. Just like the selection of the participants, the selection of documents and artifacts that were requested also allowed an in-depth view of how the ideas of CSP are transformed into instructional materials (Schoch, 2020).

To begin recruitment, I reached out to the lead contacts listed on the National Art Education Association’s (NAEA) website for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) and the Committee on Multiethnic Concerns (COMC). According to their website, the ED&I Commission “works in concert with practitioners and state and national leaders in the field to establish comprehensive strategies that work from the classroom outward, with direction and tools for addressing ED&I” (National Art Education Association, n.d.). Because of their shared mission and goal of helping art educators develop strategies that address diversity, equity, and inclusion in their teaching, I felt this population would be the best to pull from for the study.

I created a post on the COMC and general NAEA online collaboration forums sharing a link to my participant guide that provided details about myself, my research, the inclusion criteria, a brief outline of the time commitment, and my contact information (see Appendix A). I created a website through Canva to give possible participants a better understanding of my work and to visualize what their participation would entail. I requested that my co-chair send the link to her network of pre-service art educators and contacted other researchers in the field of art education to acquire participants. These were effective choices for sampling because they tapped into “existing social networks” (Noy, 2008, p. 332).
I scheduled a brief phone call with interested art teachers to gain an understanding of their teaching philosophy and context and answer any questions they had about participation. I utilized a checklist based on my theoretical framework and the reviewed literature to guide my decision on which art educators to select as participants (Appendix B). By the end of recruitment, five elementary art educators agreed to participate in the study. I describe the art teachers, their paths to teaching art, their preservice training, and their teaching contexts in the next section.

**Aqua**

Aqua is a “white, cis-gendered, mom and grew up working class.” From a young age, Aqua watched her mom as a practicing artist and “was always interested in art.” She has a Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology and says she comes to education “more from a social sciences perspective.” She received her Master’s degree in Art Education and has eight years of teaching experience in the Rose Hills School District. The 22–23 school year was her last as an elementary art teacher, and she will be transitioning to a collegiate position at a local university.

Aqua has taught for six years at Benton Elementary, a dual immersion Spanish-speaking school located in the southern U.S. Benton is one of over 100 schools in her district. After traveling back and forth between multiple school sites in her first two years of teaching, Aqua advocated to transfer to Benton. She explains, “In our district … you have to work three years at the school you get hired at, which I agree with because it's trying to protect people from getting hired at Title One schools and then running away. But me, I was trying to run to a Title I school.” The school serves 80% Hispanic, 16% African American, 2% White, and less than 1% Asian students. As the only art educator at the school, Aqua teaches PK through 6th grade. Her
district offers no elementary arts-specified curriculum, but Aqua likes “to design [her] own lessons.” Aqua has a strong theoretical foundation for her teaching and a critical consciousness of the lived realities of her students. She makes it a goal for “students [to] see themselves in the curriculum and see themselves as a potential artist from my examples of artists.” She is intensely passionate about helping students become advocates through their art and is excited to take her teaching philosophies to “impact the college kiddos.”

Cora

For as long as she can remember, Cora has “always wanted to be an art teacher.” Growing up with a mom as a graphic designer, Cora feels that she inherited “the art piece from her.” During her undergraduate studies, Cora completed a dual certification program graduating with the ability to teach general elementary education and K–12 art education. But, during her student teaching, she realized that general ed was “not what [she] wanted to do.” In the past 10 years, Cora has worked in three school districts and five schools. With all the shifting, Cora has been “[taken] advantage of a lot,” but she feels “spoiled” to be at her current school.

Cora is a white educator who has taught in the Clearview School District at Wilson Elementary for the past four years. Wilson Elementary School is a K–6 school that serves 64% White, 16% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 8% Multi-Racial, and 2% African American students in the northeast U.S. Though she is the only art educator in her school, Cora has strong relationships with the other five elementary art educators in her district. Having early release days once a week, they are given time to meet as a department approximately once a month. Artistic freedom
is especially important to Cora as she is an avid proponent of the TAB teaching style\(^1\). Cora defines TAB by three principles.

The first is that the child is the artist. The second is the art room is their studio. And the third is [exploring] what do artists do? And we’ve, so we practice and learn how artists think, and kind of what leads to their making. So, it’s all about teaching the kids to think like artists and not make a particular product. We want the kids to be able to be independent and creative and confident thinkers and be able to make decisions for themselves.

She lights up when she talks about the autonomy her students have in her classroom and exemplifies a “constant reflecting process” as she envisions new lessons and ways to make current lessons better.

**Frida**

After starting college on a soccer scholarship, Frida shared that “academics [were] not the priority” and left school to pursue graphic design. She hated “just sitting in an office,” and decided to go back to school to become an art teacher. As someone with “several learning disabilities,” she “hated, hated, hated school” and knew the only subject she could teach was art. Frida identifies as white and has 15 years of teaching experience. She is the only art teacher at her school but serves as a “lead PLC” coach and is a resource for other elementary art teachers in the district. She is hungry for relevant professional development and has a deep desire to attend art education conferences.

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\(^1\) Cora’s explanation of TAB here is based on a definition found on page four of Douglas and Jaquith’s (2018) *Engaging Learners Through Art Making: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom* (TAB).
Frida teaches at one of 15 schools in the St. Marten School District and has been there for eight years. Her school, Madison Elementary, serves 57% white, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 9% Multi-Racial, 1% African American, 1% American Indian, and less than 1% Asian students and is located in the Pacific Northwest. Just over 40% of the students at her school are classified as economically disadvantaged, and Frida cares deeply about making art “accessible.” She often gives students options for how to do “technique[s] at home” using common household items. It is obvious through observing Frida teach that she builds rapport with her students, checks in with them frequently, and makes them laugh. Frida is honest, says what she thinks, and brings her students along in her learning about enacting sociocultural knowledge in the classroom.

**Katina**

Katina identifies as a “designer, artist, invincible mom, educator, imagination incubator, and entrepreneur.” Katina originally began her college studies in Architecture and received her Bachelor’s Degree in Interior Design. However, when “2008 hit … nobody was buying any interior design services or furniture or anything dealing with this field due to the depression,” which forced her to consider other options. Both of Katina’s parents were teachers, so they encouraged her to “take the Praxis just in case” which led her to a teaching program with a three-year commitment. After completing the three years, Katina was able to take her final two Praxis tests and receive her official teaching license. As an incredibly committed single parent, Katina also desired to move away from working late nights, so she could get her son to extracurricular activities stating, “he deserves to play soccer.” She also cares deeply about her students’ experiences and well-being, striving to make the art room a safe, structured place for them. Katina walks the tension of being a Black educator in a majority white profession, visual arts, which fortifies the accomplishments of deceased white men. She stated, “The teacher has to get
used to teaching ... Black social issues too. Because we’ve been like, ‘Can I teach it?’ You
know? Is it okay to tell our truths? And nobody said we couldn’t, it was just like- I wasn’t taught
about Black artists in school.” She continues to find this balance as she enacts her curriculum
and attempts to supplement it with more Black artists and artworks.

Katina has taught for Davis County Schools and surrounding areas for 15 years. She has
experience at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Located in the Midsouth U.S., her
current school, William E. Thompson Elementary has a population of 96% Black/African
American, 2% Multi-Racial, <1% White, Asian, and American Indian students. Her school is one
of over 200 in the district, and there is one other art educator at her school. Katina is the only
educator in the study with a district-offered curriculum. Though she enjoys the flexibility and
abundance of resources the district provides through a subscription to The Art of Education
University, she is still working to “cultivate creativity” among her students.

Lucy

Lucy identifies as “white, a mom, and an artist” and is bilingual. After graduating with a
Bachelor’s degree in Art History and Visual Arts and considering law school, Lucy worked for a
district attorney for about a year. She decided to leave and attend art school, and pursued her
M.F.A. specializing in photography, becoming a practicing artist. Upon completing her Master’s,
she “wanted to make art in China” and lived there for 7 years. Feeling the pressure to provide for
herself, she started teaching part-time which eventually led to a full-time position. Once she
started her job Lucy had the realization, “I don’t know how to teach art to young kids” and
decided to enroll in another Master’s program in art education which she completed online.
Since moving back to the United States, Lucy is currently teaching and working towards her Doctorate of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in art education.

Lucy is the only educator in the study who works at a private school. The school, Germantown Elementary, serves 58% White, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 13% Multi-Racial, 10% Black/African American, <1% American Indian students, and is located on the West Coast. There is one other educator at the school who teaches students in kindergarten through second grade, and Lucy teaches third through sixth grade. Lucy has the autonomy to construct her curriculum and defines herself as a “project and inquiry-based teacher.” She values her students’ opinions and often “asks kids what they [want] to do” while also thinking about what techniques she wants them to learn. Lucy is extremely receptive to her students and is often moving around her classroom engaging their ideas and helping them to think outside the box.

**Data Collection**

Throughout the study, I used interviews, observations, and artifacts to collect data. This data collection process included two types of interviews: semi-structured and unstructured. The prompts in the semi-structured interview offered points of comparison among participants and the unstructured artifact-solicited interview allowed for new insights to surface (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the following sections, I describe the nature of each method of data collection and how they are used to contribute to the understanding of CSP in elementary art curricula.

**Initial Phone Conversation**

To determine which elementary art educators met the inclusion criteria and best fit the study, I used a series of informal questions during a brief introductory phone conversation. While talking with possible participants I gauged information such as how they define their teaching
pedagogy, what kinds of projects they feel most passionate about doing with their students, how they craft their curriculum, when and how they entered into critical consciousness, and what factors have been most influential in shaping the ways they teach. Though these conversations were unstructured, I used a checklist aligned with my theoretical framework and the central attributes of a culturally sustaining educator outlined in my literature review (Appendix B). I took notes and recorded a voice memo after the conversation to represent my decision-making process.

**Interviews**

I employed individual interviews as my main data collection method. These interviews occurred through Zoom. Because I care deeply about putting words to the decision-making process that occurs within a teacher that uses CSP, interviews helped me understand how the art educators perceive the world around them. By gaining access to the thought processes of those who enact CSP in their curriculum development, I explored the consciousness that “gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (Seidman, 2019, p. 7). Learning more about these experiences through the interviews shed light on the greater picture of what it means to be a culturally sustaining educator.

**Interview One**

The first interview was approximately 50–60 minutes and took place after the introductory phone call and before the observation. This semi-structured interview included questions about what resources, requirements, and restrictions the participants are working with and around as they plan their curriculum. As seen in Appendix C, this interview guide includes
11 questions with additional prompts used to gain a basic understanding of how the educators make curricular decisions, within what context, and for what purpose. During this interview, I remained responsive to the participants’ cues to determine the best path of questioning and how to structure the second interview (Seidman, 2019). I took notes throughout the interview and recorded audio for transcription. Concluding the interview, I utilized memoing for reflection and data analysis.

**Observations**

I took on the role of what Savin-Baden and Major (2013) consider peripheral participation of involvement in the observation portion of the study. Because of the range of locations where the participants teach, and the limitation of working as a full-time art teacher, I requested to observe a 40–55-minute lesson of the teacher’s choice through Zoom. Though the observations were not recorded, I utilized note-taking focusing on the actions of the teacher. Although it is often ideal to conduct observations for research in person, the limitations of distance and unknown circumstances and protocols due to COVID-19 required flexibility using alternative data collection methods. Regardless of physical presence in the setting, the complexity of conducting an observation remained. The factors at play included “researcher feelings and emotions about themselves, those they observe, what they observe, where they observe and the decisions they make during the process of observation” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 392). I addressed these feelings with memoing and critical reflection questions (Brown, 2021; Milner, 2007), exploring my identity and how it influenced the observations.

Specific points of observation included physical setting, participants, interactions, activities, delivery of information, and ‘subtle factors’ (Cresswell, 1998). I focused on the
intricacies of the educator’s instructional practices concerning these points of observation. I expanded my notes to reflect on how the educator exemplified (or failed to exemplify) the tenets of CSP in their instructional delivery and how it aligned (or did not align) with the information gathered in the first interview.

**Interview Two**

The second interview was a 50–60-minute unstructured, artifact-solicited interview that explored a culturally sustaining project of the art educators’ choice from start to finish. This interview took place after the first interview and observation. According to the interview guide from Appendix D, the participants were asked to talk about a project that met the following criteria:

- If the exemplar is teacher-made, photographs of student exemplars must also be provided
- Additional documents such as PowerPoints/lesson plans are beneficial but not required
- The project is designed to make genuine connections to student culture

The participants were directed to provide documents such as photographs or copies of lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, and any other visuals used when teaching the project. Looking at a teacher or student-made sample, I questioned the educators about their teaching processes and how they delivered instruction. I inquired why the participants selected each project, about their experiences planning and executing the project, and how the project has changed or evolved since the first time it was taught. As in the first interview, I utilized note-taking, transcription, and memoing.
Artifacts

To support the information gathered during the interview and observations, I asked educators to provide artifacts such as lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, teacher and student-made project examples, and any other supplemental instructional materials that help explain and visually demonstrate the art teachers’ words. I included these artifacts because they represent how the content the art educator envisions when creating the curricula is transformed into a learning tool or resource for the students. Various forms of documentation can “serve as sources of rich description of how the people who produced the materials think about their world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 124). Providing photographic evidence or documentation of these artifacts offers opportunities for other art educators to “see” how the teacher sets the stage for learning content.

Data Collection Timeline

After IRB approval had been obtained, I utilized the following protocol for each participant.

- March–April 2023: Recruitment
  - Solicitation email with participant guide to members of the NAEA focus groups, NAEA Collaborate Forum, and University Art Education Department Head
  - Connecting with art educators at the 2023 NAEA National Convention
  - Initial phone conversation to select participants through checklist and inclusion criteria
  - Confirm consent to participate
- March–May 2023: Interview 1
  - Discovering the resources, curricular requirements, and restrictions teachers feel when conceptualizing and actualizing their curriculum
- April–June 2023: Observation
  - One lesson of the teacher’s choice through Zoom
  - Focusing on the teacher and delivery of instructional content
- May–June 2023: Interview 2
  - Artifact-solicited, unstructured interview about a teacher-selected art project
Teachers provide lesson plans, instructional materials, student examples, photographs, notes, and any other relevant information about the project.

- July–December 2023: Member-Checking for accuracy

After the study, participants were compensated for contributing time to interviews, observations, instructional material documentation, and member checking. Each participant received $10 per hour of work towards the study, not exceeding $50.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the study (Stake, 1995). I used Otter.ai to record and transcribe interviews with each participant. After manually checking each transcription for errors, I used open coding to remain loose and responsive to the information gathered through each data collection method (Strauss & Corbin, 2004; Williams & Moser, 2019). Then, I implemented structural coding with a framework relating to my three research questions (Hedlund de-Witt, 2013; Saldaña, 2009). I specifically focused on information regarding participants’ (1) strategies used to promote student voice, (2) themes, topics, artists, and strategies used for instruction, and (3) barriers faced when implementing CSP. After the initial rounds of coding, I attempted to categorize codes relating to the central tenets of CSP outlined in the literature review from Chapter Two (i.e., positioning culture as dynamic, sociocultural contextual knowledge, critical reflexivity, and building relationships).

As I struggled to organize the information, I realized I needed to conduct more analysis that allowed for detailing the varying individual abilities of the art educators to enact CSP. Therefore, I used a variable-oriented, cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to compare major codes and categories across each participant’s observations and first and second interviews. Bruscia (2005) explains this method of analysis occurs when,
The researcher focuses on describing and explaining the relationship among variables, either within each case or across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Here the building blocks are variables within and across cases, rather than entire cases. The researcher looks at the data from each case to identify variables, and then compares cases to identify common variables and thematic relationships among these variables. (p. 181)

From this cross-case analysis, I distinguished three overarching tensions: the educators’ range in sociocultural knowledge, the range in pedagogical alignment, and the habitus of art education as a barrier to implementing CSP. This led to the organization of Chapters Four, Five, and Six which utilize vignettes and examples of practice from each educator to help demonstrate the major tensions from the study. I paired multiple coding and analysis strategies together to demonstrate the “plausibility of the findings” reinforcing the overarching themes of the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Throughout data collection, I kept a research journal to record my thoughts, insights, and ideas as I interacted with the participants and their artifacts. I wrote notes before and after each interview and supplemented my notes with voice memos that helped me process the data. I also reflected on the prompts discussed in my positionality section to examine how my biases affected my interpretations and analyses of the data interspersed throughout the analysis chapters (Brown, 2021; Milner, 2007).

**Trustworthiness and Rigor**

I aimed to align all aspects of the study: the research questions, data collection methods, and data interpretation and analysis. I worked to achieve alignment by building a conceptual framework including CSP, critical consciousness, and engaged pedagogy. These components shaped my collection and analysis of the data providing a unified focus on the attributes of
participants’ teaching practices. I utilized triangulation to ensure the reliability of the data by using multiple methods of collection such as interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts across the teaching contexts of five participants (Yin, 2012). I used thick description for my positionality, participant context, and findings to ensure dependability in the research study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

I established confirmability by using evidence from multiple data sources to ground my interpretations and findings as well as member-checking to ensure the credibility of my interpretations of my interactions with the participants (Stake, 1995). Though I used thick description in my memos after observations and interviews, there are still gaps in my understanding due to personal bias. To help counteract these gaps, each participant was sent a finalized draft of Chapters Four through Six on which they could make comments or suggest changes to the information pertaining to them. They had opportunities to express opinions to add to the report as well as confirm or refute specific findings of the study. The participants had minor changes regarding demographic information and clarified findings by offering additional contextual details about moments from their lessons or statements they made during interviews. Otherwise, they agreed with the major conclusions of the research. The combination of triangulation, member-checking, and thick description ensured the validity of multiple data sources achieving trust and rigor in the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

To protect the identities of the participants, each teacher selected a pseudonym. The necessary IRB approvals were procured before any recruitment or data collection began. All participants signed consent forms before participating in the study. All materials such as interview transcripts, video recordings, artifacts, and other documentation were stored securely
in a password-protected OneDrive account. The researcher, co-chairs, and qualitative methodologist were the only ones to access the information. Student identities were protected during the study as any project examples will not contain students’ names. All recorded and collected information will be destroyed within two years of the study.

**Positionality**

As is the case for many educators, my journey of becoming an art teacher started with an art teacher. My high school art teacher was one of the coolest, kindest, funniest people I had ever met. She had this innate ability to make all kinds of kids feel like they belonged in the art room. The experience of entering a classroom where I could get out my materials and escape resonated with something in me that I still do not have words for. Creating was and still is my way of understanding and existing in the world. It was in that art classroom years ago that I decided I wanted to create a space that empowered kids to do the same.

As I approached the end of my preservice education, I felt anxious but mostly prepared to enter the classroom. I had done several assignments that involved designing lesson plans and art projects. I’d completed my year-long teaching residency which exposed me to the elementary school environment, behavior management, and the navigation of the faculty’s expectations for the art department. As I entered my first year of teaching, I started to implement the lessons I had already planned and picked up from experienced art teachers. But what I had never noticed before, and what started to bother me was how all my students’ art looked the same. The art pieces hanging in the hallway seemed to reflect my decisions instead of my students’ (i.e., the “school art style,” see (Efland, 1976; Gude, 2013). Why did I think that generic projects and lesson plans from my teaching residency would engage kids I had never met?
I struggled to find resources that demonstrated learner-centered pedagogy in art education contexts. My district offered no curricula, scope, or sequence. The national art standards that I assumed I should follow were extremely vague. My administrators had no art content knowledge, and several art educators in my district were content with repeating outdated projects. I decided to go back to school for a degree in Instruction and Curriculum Leadership to see if it could provide me with the tools to create curricula that centered my students’ ideas. Though I was exposed to some of the student and culture-centered theories and pedagogies I will use in this study, I still could not find information about elementary art teachers who were putting them into practice. Where were the art teachers who teach to the diversity of today’s classrooms, creating lesson plans that relate to an array of experiences and ways of being in the world? Why were art teachers so focused on proving their worth through the work hanging on the wall? Why was the field of art education, especially in elementary school, staying the same when the student population is becoming more and more diverse?

As I have started to grow in critical consciousness, I have realized how my identity as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gendered, female has shaped my teaching practice. I work in a field where I am of the majority in almost every aspect of my identity, a field that “is dominated by specific white cultural values” (Dewhurst, 2019, p. 149). These first paragraphs of my positionality demonstrate my white privilege through my inability to understand why my projects were not only missing the mark but perpetuating outdated, stereotypical narratives, prioritizing elements of Eurocentric art education, and forwarding a culture of oppression. My concern about the lack of opportunities for creativity and decision-making from my students began to transform into an increasing awareness that my inability to see the hegemony produced in my teaching practice was a product of my own educational experience and a blaring sign of my whiteness.
As a part of the majority of art educators of both race and gender, I benefit from structures of power in and outside the classroom (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). I benefit from structural racism because it upholds my privilege (Spillane, 2015). I acknowledge that “the very existence of my white body is a visual reminder of the cultural power of whiteness—a power maintained by the control of and violence enacted upon brown, black, and indigenous bodies” (Dewhurst, 2019, p. 150). I accept that the processes of education and curriculum design are not neutral (Apple, 2019; Overby et al., 2022), nor are the spaces in which this study takes place, fully democratic. I have participated in the hegemony and oppression that I am actively trying to counteract.

It is important to note that while I critique the practices of the art educator participants in the analysis chapters, I am still learning what CSP truly is and how to utilize it in my teaching practice. Many of the outdated, homogenizing, appropriative projects I discuss in this dissertation, I have taught in my classroom. At times I still fall back on the white, Western norms to guide what my students “should” learn in art. I have missed opportunities for extended discussion with my students about complex sociocultural topics, and I have rushed through uncomfortable moments instead of pausing to reflect. I am actively working to scaffold deeper conversations with my students to prioritize their voices and experiences over my own. I hope to honor the experiences of my participants and position them as examples of what it looks like to work against many barriers to forward culturally sustaining pedagogy in contemporary art education.

**Mitigating Bias**

I utilized multiple strategies to help mitigate my inherent bias in this research study. I selected case study methodology to amplify voices that construct alternative ways of knowing in
a field that has reinforced hierarchies in race, gender, class, and power. By sharing participants’ stories of curricular reform in individual classrooms, I demonstrate new ways of understanding who is considered an expert in art education (Torre, 2009). To mitigate my perspective as a white researcher, I collected and analyzed data with “honesty, vulnerability, and self-reflection” to work through my limitations in perspective and experience (Link, 2019, p. 12). I utilized memoing before and after contact with participants (i.e. during recruitment, interviews, and observations) to examine how my identities could and did show up in the research. I reflected on questions Milner (2007) posed such as: “In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences?” and “What do I believe about race and culture in society and education, and how do I attend to my own convictions and beliefs about race and culture in my research?” (p. 395). I consulted members of my dissertation committee who have more extensive experience in qualitative and specifically with underserved populations. With their insight and the aforementioned reflection questions, I gained a better understanding of how various aspects of my identity affect how I engaged with participants as well as the data I collected.

I utilized critical reflexivity to foreground my position within the power structures of education and how it affects my relationships with my participants (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). I acknowledge that as a full-time practicing educator and a member of various NAEA and art education social media groups, I may gain more access to information than someone working solely as a university researcher. I built rapport with participants by identifying as a full-time elementary art educator and sharing stories from my own classroom. My racial identity can operate as a barrier working with educators of color as I am unable to relate to or fully understand many of their lived experiences. When attempting to transgress educational
boundaries for the sake of equity, the stakes are often higher for people of color. I kept an awareness of these differences as I collected data, preserving the identities of my participants and working to provide the most accurate representation of their experiences and lessons.

Lastly, while navigating the balance of being a white researcher studying the topic of equity in education, I explored the ways my work may be received and am aware of how I may perpetuate systems of oppression (Brown, 2021). I addressed whiteness in multiple places in the analysis chapters to critically illustrate its role in perpetuating the habitus of art education. I also used my positionality as a space to elaborate on my journey to critical consciousness and deconstructing whiteness in my teaching practice. I reflected on questions posed by Brown such as: “What are your goals for the work? What approach to justice does the work aim to accomplish?” and “How does the research inquiry or lesson reflect (and not establish) the humanity of those at the center of your claim for justice?” (p. 1179). In response to these questions during data collection and analysis, I aimed to emphasize the voices and lived experiences of my participants. My goal was to share their stories of how they enact and struggle to enact CSP, while also honoring the teaching practices they have spent years building. I established trustworthiness with my participants by asking for feedback on the data analysis in which they offered insights regarding how they were presented in the work. I also explained my evolving understanding of CSP and shared my missteps in attempting to teach in culturally sustaining ways to build rapport.
Chapter Four: A Range of Sociocultural Knowledge

One of the biggest determinants of how the elementary art educators in this study exemplified culturally sustaining pedagogy was their level of sociocultural knowledge. All five participants demonstrated different positions within a range of sociocultural knowledge and understanding of how to implement that knowledge into their curriculums. I formed three themes after conversing with and observing the educators’ teaching practices. The participants demonstrated varying abilities in utilizing (1) contextual sociocultural knowledge to guide students in artmaking, (2) reflection and research as tools for strengthening critical sociocultural understandings, and (3) scaffolded discussions for deepening students’ sociocultural knowledge. I offer examples of each theme through the educators’ teaching practices and comments made during our interviews.

Utilizing Contextual Sociocultural Knowledge to Guide Students in Artmaking

To actualize sociocultural knowledge, educators seek to understand sociocultural contexts regarding their schools, their communities, and their identities. This includes asking questions concerning how curricular and pedagogical decisions are made, how classrooms are structured and operated, how educators understand their identities in relation to their students and larger communities, and how different members interpret experiences inside and outside the classroom (Brown, 2013; Milner, 2007). Continual reflection on such questions allows educators to refine their teaching practices to best meet the needs of students, forwarding goals of social justice in education. Teaching in light of humanizing sociocultural knowledge “does not prescribe a definitive set of teaching methods, but rather describes a teaching stance, an orientation, a framework, a set of working assumptions that teachers use to guide their professional judgments
and decision-making” (Brown, 2020, p. 13). It is an awareness and care for this context that helps educators engage culturally sustaining pedagogy. This section will discuss how one participant, Aqua, embodied this nuanced understanding of context as she addressed her students and their life experiences.

Aqua’s awareness of the racial and political contexts of her school and city affects her curricular decisions. In an interview, she shared that her school has “very few white students” and their side of the city is “gentrifying rapidly,” making things increasingly expensive. These shifts have impacted the schools’ families as some have “hung on to family homes,” but many are concentrated in “subsidized housing.” Aqua stated that when she addresses topics like “antiracism” and “immigrant rights” in her classroom, they “make strong connections to the students,” both her students of color and her white students. She strategically designs projects that address these concepts such as her Community Advocate Silkscreen Prints (which will be further discussed in Chapter Five) as well as in lessons that are not directly centered around justice-related topics like the self-portrait project detailed later in this section.

Aqua continually reflects on the influence of her identity on the curriculum planning process addressing her political stance, her privilege, her upbringing, and her blind spots. During an interview, Aqua shared how essential it is to “acknowledge [the] white privilege that [she is] coming from, a white college-educated background.” She knows that her students consistently see her as a “white artist” and a “white teacher” and desires to make sure her curriculum is “reflecting student identities,” rather than her own. Aqua considers herself “radical politically and radically left” though her goal in teaching is to show varying perspectives “through the artists.” She elaborated, “If someone ever were to tell me which no one ever has, ‘Oh, just teach art, leave the politics out,’ in my opinion, art is a form of resistance, you know, and has been
used as a form of resistance.” Aqua’s philosophy of art education is aligned with her teaching practice as her comfortability and fluidity in addressing various sociocultural contexts are mirrored in her lessons. Evidence of these characteristics is displayed in the following snapshots.

**Seeking Opportunities to Address Racial Sociocultural Concepts Within Art Projects**

As the first graders entered the classroom and sat on the floor in front of the board, Aqua began the lesson with a calming meditation video. There was a small wooden rake that pulled sand across the screen. Aqua led the students in a series of stretches. She told them to, “stretch over to one side, stretch over to the other side, hands on shoulders, roll forward, roll backwards ... roll your wrists.” Students repeated the affirmation, “I love myself!” in English and then Spanish.

Aqua played a video read-aloud of *A Kids Book About Racism* by Jelani Memory (2019). In the book, Memory talked about his identity as a mixed person and how people can face discrimination because of their skin color. He said that racism can be seen in big and small ways, “ways that are almost invisible.” He prompted with the questions: “What does racism look like?” and “Why is being different a good thing?”. The students were wiggly and Aqua directed students to come out from under the table near where they were seated. As the video finished, the kids asked Aqua to play the read-aloud again. Aqua complimented students on their listening to the video but said that they must move on with the lesson.

When Aqua asked the students what the video was about, they said that it was “about racism.” She prompted further, “Racism is getting treated badly because of what?”, and the students responded, “About the color of your skin.” When Aqua asked if the students had any other thoughts about the video, they said they felt that “the book was for kids” and “it’s a good
thing to be different.” Connecting the story back to their lesson, Aqua prompted, “Why do you think we are reading this book related to our self-portraits?” The students talked about how they were about to color the skin of their self-portraits.

Aqua then asked the students, “Did you know skin color is related to sunlight? If your ancestors are from a place where there is lots of sun, then you have darker skin to protect yourself from the sun, along the equator.” She talked about how they live close to the equator. She said that lots of Indigenous people have darker skin to protect them from the sun.” Aqua asked, “Can you say Indigenous? Indigenous peoples are native to the land. I have white skin and my ancestors are from Europe where the weather is often cloudy and rainy, and they need less protection from the sun.”

Aqua emphasized the sociocultural context of the lesson by foregrounding the conversation about race and racism as critical to the act of selecting a skin color for a self-portrait. According to Angleton and Zhao (2022), “Children’s artistic representations of people are impacted by what they consider ‘likable’ and ‘desirable’ (p. 111). This is directly affected by racism and colorism which play a role in how children choose to depict themselves in their art. To prepare her students for selecting their skin tones, Aqua strategically started with these concepts to give students a framework for how they think about discrimination. In addition, Aqua provided contextual information about the physiological aspects of skin color and pigmentation (Naik & Farrukh, 2021). She provided this context to continue building her students’ understanding of sociocultural concepts as they represent themselves in their artwork.
Skill in Teaching Sociocultural Contexts Often Comes Through Missteps

Later in the lesson, Aqua asked a student to come up and model how to pick out their skin tone from a box of colored pencils. She asked, “Do you want to show the class how to pick the skin color? Do you want to? Do you feel comfortable?” Aqua flipped the camera so I could see the student’s hands matching the colored pencils against their skin. She said, “You can mix the colors if you want to.” The student took a minute to look through the basket of colored pencils, testing out different colors against his hand. She asked, “Can we have a friend help give us feedback?” The student agreed. She gave feedback and his peers gave feedback while seated on the floor. Some students suggested lighter shades and others suggested darker. Aqua asked the name of the color the student finally picked out. Aqua said, “Clap once if you can hear me. It’s not that easy to pick out a color.” Speaking loudly, she said, “Do not go up to someone and say, ‘That’s not your skin color.' Same thing in person. Talking about skin color is okay in a successful way, you don’t just go up to someone and talk about their appearance.” Students headed to their seats. Aqua grabbed a stack of papers from the back of the room and started to call out names. Each student retrieved their portrait and supplies and continued their work from the last class.

After our Zoom call, Aqua informed me of a professional development session where the head of diversity in her school district said, “Students should ultimately choose their color for their skin even if it is lighter or darker than it is realistically.” This stuck with her as she reflects on kids who,

from a young age, [at a] majority Black and Brown school … are still reaching for the peach when they are talking about skin color. And for me as a white teacher to try and correct that in a loving way. Because what am I doing up here? If I’m modeling selecting
A skin color to color in my self-portrait and I’m peach you know? And so um what I often do is I have students come up with their self-portrait and they model matching their skin color. If they’re comfortable. ‘Cause that’s, for students it’s pretty vulnerable. And so I don’t—I try not to like put a kid on the spot doing something like that. I’ve had kids break down when I tell them to pick a darker shade. I mean, there is racism and colorism in our society. And so and sometimes, kids’ self-portraits come out looking slightly lighter than they are in—realistically, and … it’s almost violence for me to like insist that it’s darker. You know? Because I have pushed hard at times and kids have broken down and I’m like, “Oh my God, I don’t know how this feels. I grew up white.” Like white privilege to not have to feel uncomfortable about coloring … my self-portrait darker.

Aqua realized that her students were going to define and color their portraits differently based on their sociocultural understanding of skin tone. Instead of first offering her opinion on how a student should color their portrait, she asks for the student’s permission to give feedback. This places her in a position where the students are the authority on the matter, and she is there to offer support as needed (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Aqua acknowledged the sociocultural context of colorism and the role it plays in her students’ decision-making. Because she knows her students exist in a world that privileges people with lighter skin, straighter hair, and Eurocentric features, she demonstrates a greater sense of attunement to her students as they select the skin tone to represent themselves (Monk Jr., 2021). Aqua did not always have this awareness, as she mentioned she often “pushed hard” for students to render their skin tones as realistically as possible. By reflecting on this gap in her sociocultural understanding and her white privilege, Aqua was able to shift her focus toward her
students and gain a better understanding of the weight of selecting a skin tone for her students of color.

**Leaning on Students as Cultural Experts**

As she continues to expand her range of sociocultural understanding, one of the key sources Aqua gains knowledge from is her students. During an interview, Aqua shared the key to creating a classroom environment in which students feel “safe to express their own viewpoints” and “[question] the teacher” must be “building relationships and building trust.” She reflected critically on her position as an authoritative figure in the classroom actively working to show her students that she doesn’t “necessarily always have the final word … on concepts where people have varying perspectives and varying opinions.” She aimed to make her classroom a space where “debate” and respect can coexist. Aqua demonstrated this in the snapshot above by both asking her students if they felt comfortable selecting their skin tone in front of other students, as well as asking if they would like feedback on their skin tone choices before offering her opinion. Even in projects that are not explicitly about student voice, Aqua actively empowers students to use their voices to represent themselves and construct knowledge in the art classroom.

Although Aqua addressed colorism briefly in the lesson, there are possible opportunities for her to expand her instruction and dive deeper into the topic as students represent their skin colors. Learning for Justice, an organization that offers free educational resources for racial justice, provides a “What’s ‘Colorism’?” lesson toolkit asking the essential question, “How do colorism and color privilege affect my students’ perceptions of themselves and others?” (Learning for Justice, 2015). In the procedures section, they recommend reading a graphic essay that visually explores topics such as racism, colorism, and representation in popular comics. Though this lesson is meant for older students, it offers foundational questions and concepts that
could be explored with younger learners. Aqua could show images from popular culture her students are familiar with in the form of movies, TV shows, comics, or book illustrations and guide her students in discussing detections of bias or privilege. As students gain experience naming colorism, Aqua could supplement her lesson with an extended color mixing activity in which students have time to practice matching their skin tones with crayons, colored pencils, or even paint to prioritize both accuracy and comfortability.

Additionally, another participant, Frida, reflected on a flashpoint from her teaching practice where she realized that her way of explaining how to rinse out a paintbrush revealed gaps in her sociocultural understanding.

[Y]ou look at like our population and it’s all the colors and you’re just like, okay, I gotta be super intentional about the way I communicate. And the privilege that I have, you know, forever when we talk about watercolor um..I, um forever I used the example of like washing your hair. When you get your hair wet it absorbs the water, right? That’s what the watercolor brush does … and I had a little Black boy be like, “My hair doesn’t do that!” And I was like, (in a whisper) “Oh God.” So I stopped using that example. You know, it’s tough. It’s hard. But I think if you’re, I mean, I was apologetic and I was like, “Oh my God, that’s so cool. You’re right.” But I mean, you have to be willing to have the humility of recognizing, when you’re, you know when stuff like that happens … I’m gonna say stuff or think certain ways because I can’t not.. because of my life experience, but I can be sensitive, you know, and try to do better all the time.

Instead of taking this moment to get defensive about being called out in the classroom, Frida reflected a posture of humility in her lack of knowledge. Her former comparison that was meant to help her students understand how to properly clean a paintbrush was based on white,
Eurocentric norms. This experience is reminiscent of a flashpoint detailed by Hood and Travis (2023) in which one author states, “[M]y assumptions were limited and did not consider my students’ lived experiences, which from a sociocultural standpoint are very different from mine” (p. 30). Because her student spoke out, Frida’s sociocultural context was expanded to include his perspective. When these moments occur in the classroom, educators often ignore them moving on to the next matter of business but taking them as opportunities for critical reflection brings about a greater consciousness and evolving sociocultural understanding of students’ lived experiences.

Section Discussion

Though the practice of creating self-portraits is common in art classrooms, the depth of sociocultural information teachers provide in terms of representing oneself varies greatly. By starting her lesson with Jelani Memory’s A Kids Book About Racism, Aqua immediately centered topics of race, racism, and discrimination as essential to talking about and coloring skin tones. For Aqua, her students must understand their racial identities are valued while also acknowledging the pervasiveness of racism (Desai, 1996).

Aqua’s book selection and predetermined questions created opportunities for six and seven-year-old students to participate in entry-level dialogue about specific sociocultural concepts. Memory asked questions such as, “What does racism look like?” and “Is diversity a good thing?” Aqua followed those questions after the video by again asking the students, “Racism is getting treated badly because of what?” The students were given the opportunity to name what they knew to be true about racism and discrimination. Aqua also provided students with information regarding the historical and physiological aspects of skin color (Naik &
Farrukh, 2021). She detailed why some people’s skin is lighter or darker based on where they lived in proximity to the equator.

Aqua recognized that racism and colorism are still pervasive in our society, which often results in students choosing lighter shades or peaches despite their actual skin tones. Aqua examined the ways these sociocultural concepts such as racism, colorism, and white privilege trickle down to her specific school context and affect the interactions she has in her classroom with her students. Because she observed her students “still reaching for the peach,” Aqua chose not to select her skin tone for the demonstration and instead asked a student to “come up with their self-portrait and … model matching their skin color.” To her, this helps foster relationships of trust and lean on students as cultural experts (Buffington, 2014).

Aqua’s teaching practices regarding showing students how to select a color to match their skin tone have evolved as her sociocultural awareness has grown. Because of her white privilege and no personal experience of racism, Aqua initially did not have the sociocultural awareness to understand why her suggestion to a student to color their skin darker could be difficult or painful. She no longer uses her skin tone to demonstrate color matching and intentionally asks students to lead the demonstration. Similarly, Frida’s initial assumption that her students would best understand how to wash out their brushes from a comparison of washing hair reflected a gap in her sociocultural knowledge. These flashpoints allowed both educators to grow in their teaching practices by shifting from the dominant perspective to positioning students as cultural experts in the art room.
Reflection and Research as Tools for Strengthening Sociocultural Understandings

Educators attempting to embody a culturally sustaining teaching pedagogy are constantly shifting on a continuum of sociocultural knowledge. There were several instances in the data where participants demonstrated an increased awareness about certain sociocultural concepts yet struggled to employ that knowledge into their lessons to be shared with students. Depicted in the snapshot below is Frida’s lesson on Native culture, totems, and landmarks. The lesson initially required the students to create totems, which is an oft-cited culturally appropriative art project (Acuff, 2014b, 2015, 2016). However, based on feedback from a knowledgeable tribal education specialist and through personal research, Frida’s initial idea for this project evolved as her sociocultural knowledge expanded.

“So Where is the In-Between?”

After spending time getting to know Frida, her teaching context, and the way she conceptualized her curriculum during our first interview, she shared her vision for the school’s end-of-the-year art show.

Frida: I really wanted to do like a walk through the Pacific Northwest and have it be like, you know, the bottom hallway was like the river and the underneath the trees and the top hallway was like above the trees in the sky and totem poles are like from arou—, from the Pacific Northwest, and I was like gall, am I gonna do all..? I can’t.. Like a totem pole, jeez, there’s nothing more like…

Addy: Yes, truly … some of what I have been reading about or researching, kind of learning in preparation to do this study is what is culturally sustaining pedagogy, like
what actually is it? And then what does it look like in elementary art education or K–12 art education? And I feel like one of the things that is voiced so much over and over is focusing on … the heterogeneity of artists so like, not saying that this … artifact or this artist is representative of the entire group of people … how um, things influence who they are and then also tying it to people who are alive today, like the vitality of the culture and what can we learn about this person instead of like, this whole group of people, trying to speak for them.

Frida: Oh yeah, that makes sense.

Addy: Yeah.. and again still trying to kind of figure out how to do it [myself].

Frida: Well, and I know, like, for example, the totem poles, like you’re not gonna create your own animals, right? Because then you’re like, totally stealing their culture and making your own but then you can’t copy what they do because then you’re like, take—so where is the in-between?

Throughout the interview, Frida and I discussed some examples of stories from educators who had attempted to implement CSP into various content areas and the misconceptions they had and assumptions they had made about Native cultures (Puzio et al., 2017). Additionally, we talked about the difficulty of building critical consciousness without community and others to “bounce ideas off of.” Frida shared stories about how Indigenous organizations and museums in her area work “really hard to get people to be aware” and see how the “culture is alive.” After the interview, in discussing a lesson for me to observe, Frida commented,
Well, I need to get these totem poles done, haha. I just don’t know how I’m going to do that. I mean, I don’t know if I’m being stubborn about this art show. If I should change my path. I need to spend some more time thinking about that. But I have these, I have the fish and the totem poles I have to get done.

Frida demonstrated an understanding that having her students recreate totems is a contentious and culturally appropriative practice in art education. This sentiment reflects the perspective of many teachers who may have a sense that a project they teach is appropriative and potentially harmful, yet they feel at a loss for how to adapt or replace it and continue to teach it anyway.

Frida recognized that having students design totems by creating their own animals is “stealing their culture and making your own” yet “copying” traditional totem designs seems like no better option. Wanting to both salvage the project and remain culturally responsive, she asked, “Where is the in-between?” When art educators stumble over how to best represent Native “culture” or how to avoid cultural appropriation, Alutiiq scholar Sabzalian (2019), suggests they are missing the point. She states, “The cultural issue at hand is not how to more accurately or respectfully include Native ‘culture’ in the curricula, but rather, how to disrupt the widespread cultural phenomenon of positioning Native people as exotic curricular objects of study” (p. 122). Keeping in mind the way settler colonialism is entrenched in public education, there are few examples of how educators are currently positioning Native people through a culturally sustaining lens.

**Why Recreating Totems is Appropriative**

Frida’s desire to fulfill her vision for the art show prevented her from disrupting the master narrative and demonstrating Indigenous culture as alive and active. Art educators often
feel pressure to showcase student artwork that complies with what “administrators and school faculty can recognize as “good work” (Hanawalt, 2018, p. 98). This often means teaching projects that are widely accepted by veteran art teachers and a part of the master cannon. Even though elementary totem projects are superficial, outdated, homogenizing, and appropriative, they persist in classrooms across the country year after year. One of the key issues with the totem project (as well as many other projects that require “copying” cultural artifacts) is that it negates both the vitality and diversity of the over 500 native tribes in the U.S. Also, when educators teach totem pole projects, they often fail to discuss the destructive role of the colonizers and present a sanitized and whitewashed version of historical events. Continuing to teach projects such as totem poles not only reifies the idea of Native people as from the past and as one homogenous group, but it also reinforces the arts as white property (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018).

In her study of three district-offered art curriculums, Link (2019) noticed white artists were linked with progress and contemporary works of art, while artists of color were consigned to the past in units on folk art or ancient art. When art educators teach outdated projects like totems, masks, or dream catchers they often position cultures as homogenized, misrepresented, and for additive purposes during holidays and celebrations (Acuff, 2014a). As students make these projects or crude renditions of sacred cultural artifacts (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005), they become consumers who can take from other cultures for their benefit. Therefore, as art educators determine what projects they will teach, they must “consistently ground their practice in a discourse that analyzes institutional power and questions the creation of culture and ownership of knowledge” (Acuff, 2015, p. 37).
Gaining Insight from Cultural Experts to Shift Curricular Choices

Some of the biggest assets art teachers have as they work to shift and expand their sociocultural awareness are knowledgeable cultural experts. With the understanding that preservice educators rarely receive culturally responsive instruction on how to teach about various cultures and art forms, cultural experts can serve as invaluable resources for presenting accurate and culturally responsive information. In the following excerpt, Frida reached out to her local tribal education specialist for some help with her lesson in an attempt to teach the project “appropriately.” Though Frida initially rejects the advice she receives, it spurs her to conduct her own research leading to a foundational shift in the execution of the project.

While Frida and I exchanged emails about setting a date and time for our Zoom observation, she forwarded me an email from her local tribal education specialist, Beth (a pseudonym). I learned that in the time since our first interview, Frida reached out to her about the project she had been planning. Beth responded,

Hi Frida,

I apologize for the delay in getting back to you! I received your voicemail and wanted to touch base with you regarding Native American art and the connection between the art classroom and the CTGR Tribal History curriculum. First off, I love the idea of incorporating pieces of Native American art projects and utilizing this method to build on the information students are learning within the classroom. I am a bit concerned though about the specific art project/pieces you have selected to create. Historically, totem poles were not created or displayed by most of the tribes of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Due to this, and the fine line between appreciation and appropriation, I would be
extremely hesitant to have students create totems. Instead, I would encourage students to create canoes that model our style(s) of canoes (link here for examples), paddles that model our style of paddles (links here and here for examples), woven baskets (lesson plan for modification here or examples here), or beaded necklaces (CTGR Tribal Member Art Shop examples here). I apologize for “squashing” your plans for the totem poles but I believe any of the alternative options above would be much more appropriate and accurate for students to participate in. When working with Native artwork, I also highly encourage these practices:

- Attribute and discuss modern-day and contemporary Native artists
- Encourage students to learn the history, usage, and meaning behind the different art. Native art was often created for a purpose, not simply for admiration.
- Emphasize the unique features of Native art and clarify to students that they are creating “interpretations” of the artwork versus recreating the actual pieces

I hope these suggestions and clarifications were helpful. Please let me know if you have any more questions or need help with other ideas/concepts.

hayu masi (many thanks),

Beth

Excited by the input from Beth, but still hesitant about Frida’s desire to continue with the totem pole project, I asked if she considered any of the recommendations from the tribal educational center. She responded stating, “I appreciated the response I got from the educational coordinator at the museum. She thought I wanted to use the local tribe, which did not make totem poles, to teach the kids and that is why she advised against it.” Frida mentioned she would
be “clear” with the kids about “what tribes made the totem poles” and shared her plan to implement one of Beth’s suggestions for making canoes with a different grade level. We ended up setting up a time for me to observe the totem pole lesson, but I inquired about additionally observing the canoe lesson. Unexpectedly, Frida sent me the following email:

I am totally trying something new, so I apologize if and when I fumble through it … while I was planning the lesson, I made some changes. I am going to call the product we make, Land Markers. After learning more about European colonization I just can’t consciously make ‘totem poles.’ We are going to make Land Markers in honor of the tribe that held the land that our school sits on.

This excerpt from Frida’s planning process demonstrates the often abrupt shifts that occur as an educator’s sociocultural awareness expands. Using feedback from a cultural expert, she was able to pivot in a way that sustained Native culture instead of appropriating it.

**Presenting Culture as Dynamic and Fluid**

The feedback from Beth discouraged the practice of “copying” artifacts, especially those that are presented to make students think they are recreating the actual pieces. Art educators focusing on the dynamicity of culture in their teaching feature modern-day artists creating work about contemporary issues situated within specific sociopolitical contexts (Chin, 2016). This requires abandoning projects in which students replicate cultural “artifacts” often completely ignoring key contextual information. Instead, art educators can transition to transformative and social action-based approaches to teaching art that engage students in critical questioning, purposefully exploring universal themes, disrupting dominant narratives, and posing problems to motivate social change (Link, 2022b).
Beth helped Frida’s knowledge evolve by recommending that she focus on contemporary Native artists and the purposes behind their work. One of the key attributes to exemplifying culturally sustaining pedagogy is to position artists, their work, and their cultures as constantly evolving. Paris and Alim (2017) state that CSP posits culture as “dynamic and fluid,” highly dependent upon “how young people in their communities live race/ethnicity, language, and culture” (p. 8). As art educators draw from this perspective, they embrace the complexities of culture and lean into multi-faceted explorations of artists and artworks. Presenting culture as dynamic means demonstrating the heterogeneity and vitality of cultures by focusing on individuals and the multiple aspects of their identity (Chin, 2013), which for many Native artists include the physical purposes of their work. The following snapshot details how Frida took this information and transformed her lesson to take on new goals and perspectives.

**Gaining Sociocultural Knowledge Produces an Evolving Teaching Practice**

After spending time greeting her students and practicing the opening routine of checking in and a “minute of meditation,” Frida transitioned into the lesson and displayed a picture of a totem pole. She asked the students, “What do you see?” As they responded, Frida prompted them further by asking if they had seen any totems in some of the local parks or if they had had any personal experiences with them. One student shared that he had seen a “small totem pole” in his “grandmother’s house.”

Frida flicked through a few more pictures of totem poles and asked students what they thought totem poles were used for. The students cited reasons related to “spirits” and “animals.” She discussed that different tribes used them for different reasons: as “property markers, grave markers, family crests or to tell family histories.” She pivoted and asked the
students, “Why do you not see these today?” and “What about our history would mean that we do not see these anymore?” After some silence, she talked with the students about colonization and the ways totems were stolen from Native people. She explained that colonizers were “afraid of the totems” and what they perceived them to represent. Frida connected this to laws that the government is currently passing to return artifacts, such as totems, back to Native people.

As Frida progressed through her slides, she showed the students a picture of a man dressed in contemporary clothing carving into a redwood tree. She told them that Indigenous culture is still alive and well in their area. Frida presented an image of a cartoon totem pole with various Sesame Street characters stacked on top of one another. She asked the students, “Why is this image wrong?” She talked to students about cultural appropriation and reminded the students of discussing appropriation in a previous art project. She asked, “Do you think Native people would find this [image] offensive?” There was a resounding ‘Yes!’ and several students nodded their heads. Frida emphasized that talking about appropriation is a way to “educate ourselves” to do better. Instead of trying to copy a totem pole, she introduced a new type of project in which the students would create “clay land markers.” She asked the students how they could honor the land and what they knew about the Kalapuya tribe local to their area. As she engaged their answers, she reminded the students that to the Kalapuya people, “wildlife and plant life are extremely important.” They discussed the importance of “local berries, trees, lakes, rivers, and salmon.”

Frida talked about the spring art show which is a celebration of the area and about how important the students’ work is for the show. She asked, “How can you draw a connection with the Kalapuya People and your own experiences? How did they live, how can we honor them, and how can we connect that with our own experiences on this land?”
She displayed these words on the screen:

- Think about the Kalapuya People and their lives. What animal or plant can you put on your Land Marker to honor them? Think about hunting/gathering.

- What relationship can you draw between the Kalapuya People and your own daily life? How do you use the land?

- Think about those relationships, what imagery can you use to honor then and now?

She asked the students, “Do you think this project would be considered cultural appropriation?” Some say no, but there are several who did not answer. She didn’t get many responses to this question and swiftly moved on.

Frida went to sit at her small demonstration table to the right of the board. Next, she turned the screen to her document camera view so the students could watch her demonstrate how to attach two ends of a clay slab to create a small cylinder. When demonstrating what symbols can be attached to the clay cylinder, Frida talked about her personal interests and connection to the land, her garden, and floating down the river. She said, “What you put on your marker is going to reflect you. What is your relationship with the land?” She asked the students what they could put on their markers. She showed how to roll a few coils to represent rushing water and made some other shapes that symbolize plants in her garden. She modeled how to attach them to the cylinder base and check if they were secure. At the end of her demonstration, Frida stated that the students could choose their seats, and they transitioned quickly and quietly.

This “lesson in practice” illustrated the evolving nature of developing a culturally sustaining teaching practice. Initially, Frida’s conception of a project that “made authentic connections to student culture” was to have students create totem poles to represent the Pacific Northwest where they lived. Even though she knew that having students “reproduce totems” was
problematic, she initially remained committed to the idea. However, as she gained sociocultural insight from both the local tribal education specialist and her own research, she began to see the totem pole project as not just problematic, but harmful by perpetuating the anthropological gaze (Sabzalian, 2019).

**Pivoting is Not a Waste of Time**

In completely rethinking the project, Frida strategically presented culture as dynamic by focusing on contemporary depictions of artists and exemplifying how Native culture is often appropriated in mainstream media (Alim & Paris, 2017). As Frida continues her critical approach to teaching Native artists, she can focus on individual, contemporary artists from the Kalapuya tribe and help students to understand the sociocultural contexts of their work. By reaching out to cultural experts and conducting her own research into Indigenous histories, Frida recognized the need to pivot her curricular choices. In our follow-up interview, I asked Frida about the turning point that made her rethink the totem pole project.

Addy: And initially you were like, I’m still going to do the totem poles because they were made by people not in your area. Is that right?

Frida: So I wasn’t even basing it on the Kalapuya people in our area. I was doing the whole Pacific Northwest. Which is even, you know, southern Canada, where totem poles were from. But then, I don’t know it just wasn’t sitting with me and wasn’t sitting with me and—
Addy: Yeah, and you said you read an article or saw an article or something that—

Frida: Yeah. I um, oh, yeah from the Canadian Museum, right? It said—when I was trying to learn about the totem poles it said that during colonization, they cut them down. Because they felt threatened that they weren’t adopting like, you know, the European language and yeah, all of that stuff. And I was just like, the more I read, I was just like, oh, it was heartbreaking that [the colonizers were erasing Native culture]. No, it’s like I have to put the effort in. And then I was like, I still can’t do like, I still can’t actually make a totem pole, even if I did do it a different way. And then I just I, for the longest time I sat at my desk, and there was just a disconnect between, like the students and the project. And I was like, I just—I could not figure out just how to connect it to them. And then I just—a landmark. I just thought of a landmark, and I was like, “Oh, that’s what we should totally do.” To connect them back to everything. So, it was like a long thought process.

Once Frida gained a better understanding of the oppression and injustice faced by Native people at the hands of white colonizers, her teaching practice started to evolve to represent this new knowledge. She realized that trying to replicate a totem pole in any form was an act of injustice, and it was imperative for her to rethink the lesson. By instead creating land markers, Frida’s students were able to connect their own stories with those of the Kalapuya people while abandoning “narrow, Eurocentric understandings of ‘culture’ and ‘authenticity’” (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 164).
Section Discussion

During an interview, Frida initially recalled her justification for the project was that totems were produced by Native tribes in their region of the United States, making the project more “authentic” than if they were from another area. However, when she learned the reality of white colonizers’ attempts to eradicate Native culture, she “[had] to put the effort in.” This led to envisioning a project that positioned not only the Kalapuya peoples’ relationships with the local land as critical to the artmaking process, but the student’s relationship with the land as well. Instead of learning exclusively about other people and cultures and trying to replicate various art forms (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Kader, 2005), Frida intentionally led students to make personal connections with the content, resulting in more individualized and meaningful products.

Frida used contemporary imagery and current events to demonstrate the dynamicity of Native culture. When representing a Native artist, she chose a photograph depicting a man dressed in modern clothing carving what seems to be a large totem pole. He wears a button-down shirt and wristwatch; a stark contrast to the stereotypical representation of Native people from the colonial era (Erhart & Hall, 2019). This strategic means of representation contextualized the artist as contemporary, as well as his form of artmaking (Chin, 2016). It is important to note that the artist’s name or tribal affiliation was not included in the PowerPoint, and he is depicted doing a very traditional activity. Providing more contextual information about the photograph, the artist, and the activity would help present a more accurate representation and more nuanced resource to teach from.

After questioning students about their prior experiences with totem poles, Frida decentered dominant perspectives by naming the oppression of Indigenous peoples as colonizers stole and destroyed sacred cultural artifacts. During her research, Frida realized that talking
about the history of colonization would be critical to her students’ learning about the history of totem poles. The story would be incomplete and whitewashed if she had chosen to proceed without shedding light on the role colonizers played in Native history. Frida presents this issue as not confined to the past but aligns the information with current issues Indigenous nations face as laws are passed, returning sacred artifacts.

Frida exemplified cultural appropriation and engaged students in critical discussion through the Sesame Street totem pole graphic. Up until this point in the lesson, Frida taught her students about the issues Native people faced and the injustices perpetrated against them throughout history. However, showing this graphic from an immensely prominent television show grounded the issue of cultural appropriation in something that the students could recognize. When asking the follow-up question, “Do you think Native people would find this offensive?”, students responded with a yes but did not say much else. Giving students more time to comment and using additional prompting may have produced more input. Frida was honest with her students about how she initially used the graphic in her former totem pole project presentation, and how she positioned it as a source of inspiration for students to work from. Now she uses it to explain cultural appropriation and demonstrate her journey learning about colonization and other forms of systemic oppression (Hood & Travis, 2023).

Frida created artmaking prompts that encouraged students to draw connections between themselves and the Kalapuya people. In her redesigned lesson, instead of positioning students as consumers of Native culture, Frida invited students to identify commonalities in the ways they experience and utilize the land shared with the Kalapuya people. Frida’s initial goals for her totem lesson exemplified studying native culture through the white gaze (Sahlane, 2023). Sabzalian (2019) refers to the anthropological gaze students use to examine art from outsider
perspectives as objects to consume. When talking about her work with educators to reform teaching practices surrounding Native cultures, Sabzalian stated,

[We] made a point to position Native artists as pedagogical subjects, not curricular objects. We moved away from a focus on Native artifacts, instead exploring what insights and perspectives Native artists offer to art and society. We also explicitly focused on cultural appropriation. (p. 82)

Frida’s attempts to transform her lesson mirror these goals as she shifted from a generalized view of Native culture to focusing specifically on the Kalapuya tribe. Additionally, she addressed cultural appropriation through the commodification of a totem pole for Sesame Street characters, asking her students why the image was “wrong.” Although she did not explicitly examine insights from members of the Kalapuya tribe, she demonstrated a shift from the homogenizing perspectives in her initial lesson design.

Though this lesson successfully depicted the Kalapuya culture as dynamic, there are still ways Frida can deepen her instruction. Frida discussed generic contemporary issues Native nations face, yet she did not talk about any individual artists from the Kalapuya tribe. Sabzalian (2019) suggests thinking “locally and regionally about Native people when possible” (p. 91). Exploring local, contemporary Kalapuya artists could provide students with an even clearer picture of the dynamicity of culture. In addition, though students were asked critical questions such as “Do you think Native people would find this offensive?” and “Would this landmarker project be considered culturally appropriative?”, the time given for student responses to these questions was brief. There could have been more time devoted to rich discussion on these topics. Frida’s initial prompts were powerful, yet she lacked questions to further probe students’ opinions and ideas about the concepts she was teaching. Asking students how they see evidence
of cultural appropriation in various media or advertising could offer a way to further the conversation. Students could also lead discussions to brainstorm non-appropriative ways they could honor the Kalapuya people with their art.

**Scaffolding Deeper Sociocultural Knowledge for Students Through Discussion**

When educators attempt to teach about various cultures, artists, and artworks, the contextual information they provide is often surface level with the main focus on giving students time to work on their art. This is a reasonable priority for elementary art educators since their time with students is often limited to 30–60 minutes a week. However, when art educators relegate discussions to only a few minutes or nothing at all, they miss great opportunities to engage with students about important topics. In this section, I explore Lucy’s introduction to her students’ social justice printmaking project and some ideas for digging deeper to provide her students with greater sociocultural context.

**Shifting Focus from the Product to the Conversation**

The following excerpt is from my observation of Lucy’s lesson on social justice prints. This lesson was taught with approximately 6 weeks left of the school year. During the time students were working on drafting their prints, they were also selecting artworks for their end-of-the-year gala that serves as a fundraiser for their art department. This was the second lesson of the project, so they had already spent some time during the first lesson working on more extended social justice conversations that I did not get to see.

*After greeting and checking in with her students, Lucy introduced the content for the day. She told her students about artist Justyne Fischer who makes “prints about justice.” She asked*
the students to look at an image of one of Fischer’s prints called Two Seconds\(^2\), which was projected on the board. In the image, a white police officer is leaning out of a patrol car with a gun in hand aimed at a Black boy with a banana at his side. The top of the police car reads, “Cleveland Police.” The scene takes place outside near a picnic table and the name “Rice” is hung on a banner above it. Lucy prompted the students to tell her what they saw and what they thought the art was about. The students responded with short responses such as, “violence,” “racism”, and “injustice.” After a few answers, she explained that Fischer creates work about environmental issues, police brutality, and “justice for Black people.” Then quickly transitioning, she asked the students, “What are some qualities of a good print? What is going to make it more eye-catching?” They discussed aspects like bold text and details that are easy to see.

Lucy explained to the students that they would be creating a one-color print using only black ink. As they created their designs, Lucy wanted the students to understand that if they made things too small, they would lose detail in the background. “Should you be making anything that is really small?” she asked. The students responded with, “No, it would be hard to see.” They were going to sketch out a design for a social justice poster in their art journals that would later be carved onto styrofoam.

Lucy selected a powerful artwork with highly charged visual imagery to show her students as they begin work on their projects. The resource Lucy chose to engage her students focused on police brutality and violence against Black bodies. It is also a work used to honor the memory and tell the story of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by a white Cleveland police officer in 2014. Although some of this information is evident in the print, Aqua

\(^2\) Fischer, J. (n.d.). Two seconds [Woodblock Print].

did not refer to this contextual information when showing it to her students. Instead, she asked, “What do you see?” and “What do you think this art is about?”. Though students were still able to comment on the artwork based on the imagery, their responses were limited and lacked detail.

**Scaffolding Discomfort**

The students’ responses to the work were brief, and opportunities were missed for further gauging their voices and opinions on the topic. In her dissertation, Link (2022b) states that educators should “consider how they are scaffolding discomfort,” including “the discomfort that comes with discussing sociocultural topics that can be uncomfortable or vulnerable because they may highlight differing world views or call into question our lived experience or embodied identity” (p. 280). Students did not seem to show discomfort when they were discussing this piece, but I could not help but wonder what they were thinking or if they knew how to comment on the print. To provide additional context during member-checking, Lucy stated that her school prioritizes having conversations about difficult topics starting in early elementary school and that the general education teachers consistently work to scaffold discomfort as a regular part of learning. Lucy also noted that the 4th graders specifically study American history, focusing on the experiences of Indigenous peoples, enslavement, and the Civil Rights era. After the observation, Lucy indicated students’ prior knowledge helped prepare them for Fischer’s work due to this exposure in other classes. It is important to address this context when considering the students’ intake of sociocultural information and questioning how it translates from class to class.

Lucy asked more questions about the qualities of the students’ prints than she did about the artwork she presented. This focus on the visual components (Yenawine, 2013) of students’
artworks over the conceptual was a trend seen across multiple participants throughout the study and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six. Though her directions were necessary for students to be successful in designing their printing blocks, the content of Fischer’s work was minimized in comparison. While considering that Lucy had intentional conversations with her students in lessons leading up to this one, it is worth contemplating how art educators can structure their content to facilitate deep, rich sociocultural discussions while also prioritizing building students’ artmaking experiences.

**Chapter Discussion**

When educators exemplify critical consciousness, they possess what Brown (2013) calls Humanizing Critical Sociocultural Knowledge. According to Brown (2020), “educators need to have knowledge and understanding of the dark—the history of and ongoing practices of oppression, injustice, and inequity” (p. 12). More specifically, this includes a foundational understanding of sociocultural factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, religion, ethnicity, and culture. Critically conscious educators understand that when these factors interact and converge, they result in concepts such as color evasiveness, racism, deficit-thinking, racial superiority, whiteness, white privilege, meritocracy, and homophobia, and ultimately play a key role in the teaching environments they inhabit (Brown, 2013; Brown & Kraehe, 2010; Love, 2019) (See Figure 4). The educators in this study all demonstrated differing levels of sociocultural knowledge and understanding of the ways the concepts shape their teaching environments.

Educators with humanizing sociocultural knowledge do not limit their understanding of sociocultural concepts to a generalized level; they are committed to continually learning the
nuanced sociocultural concepts at play within their individualized teaching environments (Nieto, 1999). In the first section, Aqua grappled with these concepts as she determined how to teach her students about coloring their skin tones. After initially pushing kids too hard to represent their skin tones accurately, she gained an insight into how to acknowledge racism, colorism, and discrimination as part of her context for teaching her students of color. Aqua conceptualized her curriculum to mitigate her white privilege and focus on artists that reflect her students’ identities and life experiences (Dewhurst, 2019).

Educators often struggle to bring depth into their lessons as they address artists and their work. As noted previously, educators in this study often struggled with a disconnect between their goals for lessons and the sociocultural knowledge required for enactment. Even though there were significant transformations in Frida’s lesson from when she was planning to when she taught it, she still gave little sociocultural context about the Kalapuya people and their historical and contemporary artistic traditions (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Chalmers, 2019; Sabol, 2000). Rather than comparing differing perspectives within the Kalapuya tribe, she homogenized them by mentioning no artists by name. Lucy desired to expose her students to a new contemporary artist, Justyne Fischer, in hopes of bringing more social justice projects into her curriculum. She limited the contextual content surrounding Fischer and the concepts in her work by prioritizing directions for student artmaking. Students received deeper sociocultural instruction on the piece in an earlier art class, but the lesson structure was reflective of the time limitations art educators face as they decide what content to cover and to what depth.

Each of the participants’ depth of sociocultural knowledge was directly related to how they addressed the sociocultural contexts of the information they presented in their lessons. Aqua demonstrated a more nuanced range of sociocultural knowledge, whereas Frida’s understanding
of how to teach about other cultures within a contemporary, culturally responsive lens is still emerging. Many lessons can be gained from Frida’s experiences as she reached out to cultural experts and conducted her research as a means of developing her range of sociocultural awareness and how to demonstrate it in her curriculum. In the next chapter, I will examine how the participants’ sociocultural understandings played a role in achieving pedagogical alignment as they worked to implement more culturally sustaining practices by addressing contemporary social justice issues through art and viewing students as cultural problem-solvers and storytellers.
Chapter Five: A Range of Pedagogical Alignment

In Chapter Four, I discussed the theme of elementary art educators demonstrating a range of sociocultural knowledge and varying abilities to implement that knowledge into their lessons. In this chapter, I will explore how the participants showed a range in their pedagogical alignment. Often what participants stated as their curricular goals during interviews directly aligned or conflicted with the content of their lessons. When art educators demonstrated pedagogical alignment, their objectives, class discussions, artists of study, and artmaking prompts reflected the overarching goals of the unit. However, during moments when these components were misaligned, it often led to shallow dialogue and missed opportunities for students to use voice in their work. The following sections examine the range of pedagogical alignment among Aqua’s, Cora’s, and Katina’s lessons.

Alignment Between Curricular Goals and Student Artmaking

The following section depicts one of Aqua’s yearly projects in which her fifth-grade students design a silkscreen print advocating for a solution to a community issue of their choice. Throughout the project, students examine the work of contemporary artists and have detailed discussions about sociopolitical issues to help guide their artmaking practices. The art students study, the conversations they have, and the lens through which they examine community problems all scaffold alignment towards the unit goals and are reflective of Aqua’s social action philosophy of art education. The students exercise voice as they engage in dialogue around culturally relevant issues and make silkscreen prints advocating for change in their local communities.
Teaching Contemporary Artists Whose Work Aligns with Project Objectives

During our artifact-solicited interview, Aqua shared with me a yearly, semester-long, printmaking project called Community Advocate Silkscreen Prints where fifth-grade students create posters “advocating for a cause of their choice.” Aqua stated that on the first day of the project, she introduces her students to Dignidad Rebelde, a “silkscreen duo made up of Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes, from Oakland, California.” Her PowerPoint includes over 10 examples of the duo’s prints that address topics such as migration, deportation, water privatization, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, and reproductive justice. Each year, she analyzes and discusses each example with her classes, while also referring back to the prints throughout the project. Aqua shows her students a YouTube video of the artists and their work so they get to “hear their voice(s) and see them do the actual process of silk screen printing.”

Additionally, students learn about the artist, Esther Hernandez, and her silkscreen print, Sun Raid (Figure 2). The print is a subversion of a Sun Maid raisin box and depicts a skeleton with long brown hair holding a basket of grapes and a bright yellow sun in the background. Hernandez includes several plays on words throughout the print that are made to criticize the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. During the interview, Aqua said she and her students examine features of the print such as ‘ICE’ written on the skeleton’s wrist, ‘Hecho in Mexico’ but ‘mad in USA’, and the replacing of ‘maid’ with ‘raid.’ To address the text at the bottom of the print, ‘Guaranteed deportation, Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Triques, Purepechas,’ Aqua said she utilizes maps to show her students “Indigenous groups in Mexico” and the land they originally occupied. She talks with her classes about “arbitrary” borders stating, “Mexican people are indigenous to this land” and “It’s not white Europeans’ place to come in and draw these borders and then enforce these borders.”
To prepare them to advocate for a cause of their choice, Aqua strategically introduces students to Dignidad Rebelde because they advocate for various forms of justice within their communities. According to their website, Cervantes (Xicanx) states that their collaboration produces screen prints, political posters and multimedia projects that are grounded in Third World and indigenous movements that build people’s power to transform the conditions of fragmentation, displacement and loss of culture that result from histories of colonialism, patriarchy, genocide, and exploitation. (Cervantes, n.d.)

Aqua utilizes Barraza and Cervantes’ work as a means of exploring ways art can be used to inspire transformation while also addressing some of the causes behind systemic injustice and inequity (Brown, 2020). Though she does not use the terms patriarchy, genocide, or exploitation with her students, she does talk about the role of “white Europeans” and their colonization and enforcement of borders within Indigenous lands. This instruction aligns with the social action approach to teaching multicultural art education in which “context on artist’s identity and activism are central and lead students to ask how they can make social change to challenge stereotypes and systems” (Link, 2022b, p. 325). Though students can select any issue of their choice for this project, it is helpful for them to see detailed examples of artists advocating for social change.

“Hear Their Voices”

Aqua provides sociocultural context for Dignidad Rebelde through a video in which the artists discuss their process and their art. She stated that when students can “hear their voices” and see the screen printing process in action, they can connect more to the artists and envision what they will be doing for their prints. Aqua also shows several different prints from Dignidad
Rebelde depicting a wide range of sociopolitical issues. Because she dedicates the first class period completely to looking at these examples, she can facilitate rich conversations with her students. Aqua does not limit these conversations to one lesson, but rather continues the dialogue and pulls up these examples for reference throughout the project.

Aqua employs the print, *Sun Raid*, by Ester Hernandez (2008) to encourage her students to consider how a piece of artwork can be used to comment on sociopolitical issues. By methodically questioning students about each of the references made in the text of the artwork, Aqua gauges their understanding of some of the current issues regarding migration and deportation, especially prevalent in their state. The print names specific groups of indigenous people such as the “Mixtecos, Zapotecs, Triques, Purepechas” which are some of the most commonly deported. Aqua uses a map to show the geographic locations of these communities and names that it is critical to discuss with her students the role of the colonizers drawing “arbitrary” borders.

Aqua addresses the sociocultural context of the *Sun Raid* artwork, acknowledging the complexity of the cultural references made so that students can understand larger societal injustices (Sabol, 2000; Stuhr, 1994). This presentation of culture as fluid and dynamic reflects the goals of culturally sustaining educators as they talk about artists and their work with students (Acuff, 2013a; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). Aqua’s understanding of the societal tensions that exist allows her to present both Ester Hernandez and Dignidad Rebelde with nuance, leading her students to see how art can be used to advocate for or against particular sociopolitical issues.
Positioning Students as Community Advocates in Their Artmaking

During the same interview, Aqua reviewed what she does with students on subsequent days of the project. She said that on day two she states the project’s learning goals which are framed around the Studio Habits of Mind. She uses the Habits to get her students “thinking like artists.” The learning goals include:

- I **observe** the silkscreen posters by Dignidad Rebelde.
- I learn about making artwork to raise awareness about an issue.
- I **explore** various topics facing communities across the world.
- I **reflect** on my own identity and decide on a topic that is important to me and my cultural group and/or community.
- I **envision** a silkscreen poster with text and imagery to communicate my message to the world.
- I **express** myself by creating a stencil that raises awareness about this topic.

Aqua said she makes it a point to define key vocabulary words such as identity, advocate, activist, community, culture, and ethnicity. Aqua asks students how they define “community,” prompting, “Could that be people on like a global level, or is that more local? Like, what, what type of community are you thinking of?” She said that “it’s pretty open-ended” and that the students can choose any community they want, but that they need to be specific. Aqua draws on the Principles of Cultural Proficiency (Nuri-Robins et al., 2011) and reminds her students, “problems will be solved based upon your cultural group or your cultural background,” making their understanding of culture imperative. Aqua prompts her fifth-graders to brainstorm the community problem they would like to address in their sketchbooks. She displays these words:

Think about who you are and a topic that is important to you you would like to raise awareness about. What is the **problem** in your community or that your cultural group faces? Think about a **solution** to the problem. How can we solve it and make it better? Create a **slogan** [catch phrase] to communicate your community solution. Think of an
image that shows your solution. Write what is underlined in your sketchbook to help you brainstorm.

Community problem:

Community solution:

Solution slogan:

“What Makes You Sad or Mad in the World?”

For students who may feel stuck, Aqua uses prompts such as, “What makes you sad or mad in the world?” and “How can we solve it?”. The students brainstorm images that represent their causes to include with their slogans in the prints, a process that takes multiple class periods. Once the students are finished, Aqua helps them spell check their slogans and provides “carbon transfer paper and printed out alphabets” to trace onto thick poster-board paper for the stencil. Aqua has curated a library of printed symbols, graphics, and fonts that grows each year to accommodate the topics students wish to address.

Once students have completed their compositions of transferred text and symbols, they begin to cut them out using an Exacto knife. This step of the project takes several weeks and lots of focus as students carefully remove each letter and symbol to form their stencil. After the students’ stencils are completed, Aqua brings in a skilled, local silkscreen artist to demonstrate the printing process and help students begin printing their posters. Using one or two colors of ink, students pull multiple editions of the prints.

The conclusion of the project coincides with the fifth graders’ graduation, at which Aqua displays the posters as a backdrop for the ceremony. She said the students “look all dapper”, “get to be celebrated” and the “parents and the community or the families of the kids get to also read the messages of the other children.” When reflecting on a previous celebration, Aqua said, “It
was really interesting because um last year one of the kids … put like, ‘Stop selling guns’ or like ‘No guns, Peace now’ and it was right before Uvalde. And then it went on display after Uvalde.” Aqua said that the students’ posters often “reflect the times” and are relevant to what is happening in the news. She provided examples of when “Trump was in office there was a lot of ‘Respect Women’, ‘Respect Immigrants’ … and then during Black Lives Matter it was a lot of ‘Black Lives Matter’ or like ‘Stop Racism’, ‘Stop Police Brutality.’” At last year’s graduation, she implored attendees to pay attention to the students’ voices: “This is how we’re going to change the world. Listen to the kids. Like read all these messages.” We concluded the interview with the question, “Why do you think this project is important for students to do and why does it matter to you?” Aqua responded,

[I]t is essential for positive community change to occur because we’re in a pretty serious situation in the world with the U.S. continuing economic injustice and race, racial injustice and capitalism and with global warming, you know, that which is—all related, all those things are all related. It’s essential for us to encourage youth to think of solutions to these problems and to become comfortable in verbalizing and advocating for these solutions. And I’m not telling them what to think. I don’t ever say the world is messed up because of this. They know, they can see it, they can see it.

*Student Voice*

Aqua creates opportunities for student voice throughout the project. She engages students in the analysis of the art, in the brainstorming and actualization of the posters, and by amplifying their voices in the spring art show for their graduation. Aqua communicates that students not only have the power to name issues they see within their communities but that they have the
authority to suggest solutions too. For Aqua, this project is “all about [students] brainstorming solutions” and seeing themselves as “potential artists.” This exemplifies what Mernick (2021) describes as critical consciousness in which students “observe our world closely, reflect on what [they] see, envision alternate ways of being, and engage in a continuous cycle of judging and revising our world toward these goals” (p. 19). Rather than viewing students as empty vessels, Aqua sees her students as powerful future leaders and lets that guide her curriculum and lesson structures.

Aqua scaffolds students’ ability to name the issues they would like to address in their prints by first defining terms such as identity, advocate, activist, community, and culture. Taking the time to give students a basic understanding of what an advocate and activist are, she helps them to position themselves as advocates and activists in their artmaking. As they reflect on and define terms like identity, community, and culture, students see how their view of the world and societal issues is largely based on how they experience life with others. The students then use this foundation to help them brainstorm solutions for the issues they are passionately advocating for or against through their prints.

Aqua utilizes the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency (“The Guiding Principles,” n.d.) to shape her understanding of culture, while also using it to inform how to support her students in creating their community advocate silkscreen prints. Although she does not specifically name these principles with her students, she shared some of them with me during our interview. Some of the principles included, “culture is a predominant force in shaping values, behaviors and institutions’ policies and practices”, “people are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture”, and “people have personal and group identities.” Aqua aligns with these principles throughout the project as she has students analyze the work of Dignidade Rebelde and
Ester Hernandez, discuss key terms, and design their prints. For example, when students work to name their community issue of choice, Aqua emphasizes that their cultures will play a role in what issue they determine is valuable to address. Aqua defines key terms such as “culture” and “community”, teaching their complexity as she helps her students name different layers of their identities, both group and individual, so that they can make more personally meaningful art.

Aqua recognizes her students’ attunement to contemporary events and political issues that affect their communities. Some examples of slogans that students have chosen in the past directly addressed things like Black Lives Matter, Trump’s presidency, and the Uvalde shooting in Texas. Students’ participation in Aqua’s project and selection of subject matter for their prints demonstrate that they are not too young to comprehend political events and activism; rather, they have the capabilities to take part in meaningful dialogue and reflect on sociopolitical issues (Silva Dias & Menezes, 2014). As Aqua demonstrates a social action approach to teaching art education, she prioritizes students creating art that “questions, disrupts, or comments on social issues to effect change” in ways that are relevant to their communities (Link, 2022b, p. 326).

Section Discussion

The goals and objectives Aqua created for this project are directly aligned with what the students are doing in each lesson. In the interview, Aqua said that the students would demonstrate success in the project if they could state, “I [made] a silkscreen print that is important to me” and “I [designed] my stencil that clearly communicates my stance on a topic and advocates for what my cultural group and/or community needs.” Through her selection of artists, scaffolded questioning, brainstorming process, and display of students’ art, she structures the project in a way that leads students to achieve the goals laid out over a semester.
Aqua positions students as advocates in the project, leaning on their identities and perspectives of community to guide their activism. This is representative of what Wasson et al. (1990) suggest because,

In a student/community-centered educational process, student experiences are not only important, but become the basis for developing and presenting course content and activities. Teachers need to draw examples from cultural experiences familiar to the students, even if these are different from the teachers’ own experiences. (p. 237)

Her range of sociocultural knowledge and experience designing projects that are attuned to students’ lifeworlds help Aqua to exhibit a culturally sustaining teaching practice (Alim & Paris, 2017). Aqua understands students will name and suggest solutions for problems that are specific to their communities, and she can support them through relationships built with students and their families. During the interview, Aqua revealed she has done this project with groups of students for several years, originating when she was part of a community arts youth organization. The project has evolved but still reflects the experience of advocacy and activism that resonated so deeply with her as a teenager.

Aqua reinforces her students’ artistic voices as she displays the screenprints at the fifth graders’ graduation, imploring friends and family members to listen to the students’ messages. She embodies what Nieto (1999) commends, that “listening to what students have to say about their experiences and attending to their suggestions can result in a more critical conception of multicultural education” (p. 193). The students’ community advocate prints are designed to communicate stances on sociocultural and sociopolitical issues; therefore, the project does not end once the prints come off the press. It concludes with the exhibition of the students’ work and
as the audience engages with messages and visual imagery communicating the students’ hopes for change in their world.

**Alignment of Goals and Scaffolded Questioning**

As educators create curricula, they often focus more on what students’ finished artworks will look like than they do on scaffolding students’ thinking and dialogue in their classrooms. This is often attributed to the pressures on art teachers to display work that is visually pleasing and decipherable to those who view it, which is depictive of the “school art style” (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Efland, 1976; Gude, 2013). In the excerpts below, Cora attempted to break through barriers to discuss a contemporary artist using his work to address police brutality, yet her questioning kept students’ engagement of the topic at a surface level. She reflected on missed opportunities, flashpoints, and ways to improve the lesson moving forward.

**Introducing Social Justice Topics in the Artroom**

Cora warmly greeted her fifth graders as they entered her classroom. It was the end of the day on a Friday afternoon before the last week of school and the students were buzzing. “Come closer,” Cora said as she motioned for the students to move toward the screen at the front of the room. Displayed were two illustrations that depicted two of the Studio Habits of Mind: “Understand Art Worlds” and “Reflect.” Cora told the students that they would be using their “art minds” to “understand art worlds and reflect” in their lesson.

She transitioned to the next slide picturing two artworks but purposefully gave no descriptive or identifying information. Both images were graphite portraits, partially colored with differing levels of detail and shading. Cora asked the students to “Look at the images for 30
seconds.” She then prompted, “What does your eye see? What does your mind see?” Cora said, “Share with someone next to you, what do you see? Take 30 seconds.” The students talked to those closest to them.

When the time was up, Cora grabbed a chime from her desk, rang it, and waited for the students to get quiet. As some continued to talk, she said, “I am waiting for us to be ready so we can continue. I want to hear what you talked about.” When addressing the class, she said, “Raise your hand” to prompt the students for their answers. Students’ responses included, “I notice that they are not fully colored in”, “The colors pop against the line drawing”, and “I notice one has more color than the other.” When Cora asked one student why she thought each portrait had different amounts of color, the student responded, “Maybe they ran out of materials.”

When Cora asked what else the students noticed, one boy jokingly said, “It looks like Jeffrey’s sister.” The class laughed at his comment. Calmly yet directly, Cora said, “We need to look and make sure we are not making assumptions. I would not do this if I didn’t think you could handle it.” She continued, “It is important to know that people are not related just because they may have the same skin color.” Cora moved on to another student with her hand raised. One girl hypothesized that the artist “may have used ProCreate.” Another student mentioned how the “people in the portraits are facing different directions.”

Cora moved to the next slide and played a video excerpt of artist, Adrian Brandon, explaining his series, Stolen. Brandon stated the series focused on “Black lives that have been lost by the hands of the police” and went on to discuss his process (LX News, 2020). The class was silent for the first time since coming in. After the video finished, Cora read a quote from Brandon on the next slide:
This series, titled ‘Stolen’ is dedicated to the many Black people that were robbed of their lives at the hands of the police. In addition to using markers, and pencil, I use time as a medium to define how long each portrait is colored in. 1 year of life = 1 minute of color (LX News, 2020).

Cora asked the students, “What do you think? Tell me—Why do you think I am showing you this?” As a student attempted to answer, Cora turned her attention to the group of students who were talking and laughing again. After going over to address their behavior, she shifted the class’s attention back to the girl who raised her hand to answer. The girl stated, “Artists can make a statement with their work.” Cora affirmed her answer and then flipped to another slide with two new pieces of artwork from a different artist.

“What Does Your Eye See?”

While questioning students about Adrian Brandon’s art, Cora spent more time on the visual aspects rather than the sociocultural aspects of the work. By limiting her line of questioning to “What does your eye see?” and “What does your mind see?”, her students’ responses remained at a surface level noting attributes about the colors and materials the artist may have used. Cora prompted students regarding what they saw, yet asked only one prompt about what they thought once she provided contextual information. Utilizing scaffolded, critical, contextual questioning may have helped students dig deeper leading to a greater understanding of the pieces.

In Link’s (2022b) dissertation, she offers a critical multicultural reflection tool (Figure 1) that breaks down the different approaches to teaching art through a multicultural lens. When interpreting artists and their work, she states that an additive approach studies cultures
“simultaneously on an aesthetic/surface level” and the “teacher guides brief and structured
discussions about interpretations often confined to day 1” (p. 325). On the other hand, a
transformative approach to multiculturalism in art education interprets artworks with the artist’s
“identity” and “perspective” as crucial for understanding the sociocultural context of both their
life and art (Link, 2022b, p. 325). A transformative approach utilizes discussions throughout the
project, not limited to day one. Cora danced between the two approaches as she attempted to
provide insight into Brandon’s perspective using videos and quotes, but she did it briefly and in
conjunction with another artist who makes work on different subject matter. Cora addressed the
sociocultural context of the work by showing videos and quotes from the artist, yet she gave
students little time to process or engage in dialogue about the information they took in. Cora
stated that this is often representative of the TAB method, in which there is a brief exposure to
artists and their work, but the priority is students’ studio time. The video and quotes in her
presentation mentioned sociocultural concepts such as racism, discrimination, and police
brutality, but there were few opportunities for students to share their thoughts on these topics.
Grounding the discussion with context for why students were learning about these artists or how
the concepts were relevant to their communities could help to more fully engage students.

During an interview, we continued to talk specifically about the amount of time she
allotted for her introductory questions when discussing Brandon’s work such as “What does your
eye see?” and “What does your mind see?” versus the amount of time spent on the question,
“What do you think about this?” after Cora had shown the video explaining the work. Cora
mentioned wanting to use the first two prompts after attending a session led by Julie Toole, a
seasoned TAB art teacher and advocate, at a conference held by the TAB Institute. Though they
are good introductory, ice-breaking questions, they needed to be followed with strategic prompts
that addressed the sociopolitical issues in Brandon’s work. This line of questioning is similar to Visual Thinking Strategies (Yenawine, 2013), a common tool used by museum and K–12 art educators to study works of art. However, without an in-depth understanding of the sociocultural context of an artist and their work with which to guide subsequent discussion, art educators will continue to have surface level conversations with their students. During an interview, Cora and I discussed how her questions for the lesson prioritized the “visual” aspects of the work as opposed to the contextual aspects.

Addy: It’s easier to spend more time on those, ‘What does your eye see?’ … it’s like there’s nothing controversial about like, identifying that part of the face is colored and part of it’s not or there’s pencil used here and there’s color used here … that is so much easier to talk about than necessarily like letting it sit [that] these pieces were created because they represent the lives of Black people and Black kids being killed by police officers … And then but that question of, ‘What do you think about this artwork or what do you think about this topic?’ … we often speed through that because it’s harder to continue prompting through that or to navigate students’ responses because they might be what we expect or what we might not expect.

Cora: Because that I think too that kind of, we spent more time on the easy part. I want to do more of like, if I don’t know what to say, it’s okay just talking about it. Because you’re right, like the part that we spent the most time on was the easy part … so maybe thinking of some other questions too after they know about the work. Like some explicit questions?
After reflecting, Cora saw the need for strategic critical questioning and scaffolding that will allow students to gradually work through more complex topics. This is representative of the greater habitus of art education (that will be discussed in Chapter Six) that prioritizes the elements and principles of art and design over contextual substance when addressing works of art (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Efland, 1976; Link, 2019). Cora also stated a desire to “just [talk] about it” even if she is unsure of how to respond to a student or if the conversation goes in a different direction than originally planned. Brown (2020) states that humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge “recognizes that good teaching is always carefully planned and executed, while also capable of improvisation” (p. 13). Having a greater sociocultural grasp on concepts such as race and racism and the specific ways they operate within the classroom and community environments will allow her to demonstrate more comfort and flexibility in conversations with her students.

Though it was not originally part of the study design for me to give feedback to the participants on their lesson, Cora expressed a desire to talk through the observation. It is a part of who she is as an educator to critically reflect and analyze, especially when she is trying something new. She graciously allowed me to share what I observed and wanted to know how she could improve the lesson. As an elementary educator myself, I am simultaneously working through the same tensions as I try to develop lessons and projects that are culturally sustaining. I noticed the time spent on each artist and the depth of Cora’s questioning because I am currently working on the same things in my classroom. I can identify the same tendency to rush through uncomfortable moments in my own practice. Though Cora agreed with me, I suggested examining how much time she spent on each artist and the depth of her questions. As she works through developing more lessons like this one paying specific attention to her pacing and
scaffolded questioning, she may invite other educators to observe and give feedback or record them for herself to reflect.

**Responding to Students in Moments of Tension**

Towards the end of our second interview, Cora reflected on a flashpoint from her instruction. She named a specific part of the lesson in which a student made a “problematic” race-based statement leaving her unsettled and wanting to process. Overall, Cora said she was pleased with the lesson, yet she continued to ponder when a student commented on Brandon’s portraits stating, “Oh, that looks like Jeffrey’s sister” referring to one of the few Black students at the school. Cora told me she is okay with how she “handled it in the moment” by responding, “[you] cannot just assume their race based on what they look like” yet she questioned if her instruction was actually “productive.”

We discussed that it is common in moments of tension in the classroom to “brush over something” or quickly “move on” (Hood & Travis, 2023). Though Cora said she does not think she “could have gotten more into it in the moment,” we discussed prompts she might use going forward when a student says something potentially problematic, such as “What do you mean by that?” or “Can you explain that comment further?” We also talked about the fear of “saying the wrong thing” and wanting to avoid critical conversations about topics like race until we feel more prepared. I mentioned that fear and avoidance are often a “byproduct of whiteness,” which reinforces that educators must explore the emotionalities of teaching about race and how whiteness functions at systemic levels to uphold white supremacy (Matias, 2016). As Cora explored the emotions she felt during the lesson, she worked to understand how her identity and
her students’ identities may have played a role in the interaction. In the second interview, Cora reflected on her assumptions and bias regarding the student’s comments.

Cora: I also sometimes find myself assuming that they’re trying to stereotype and maybe they’re not but like, I could have taken offense to that when he didn’t really mean that. Unfortunately, he was being silly otherwise, I didn’t really trust that he was coming from a good place. Again, that could have been my own bias and coming from a non-Black student. But this student, he’s from—or he speaks Portuguese. I don’t know where he’s from but that’s his first language. So I think also I have biased thinking that maybe he wouldn’t have said something like that because he’s not white, you know? Coming from a non-white student I guess … And like when I showed this to this other fifth-grade class, and I have—there is a Black student in the class, um I definitely felt more nervous I think. So that’s something I’ve been thinking about too because I don’t want to other students. How they feel or if this is going to be too much. Because I have wanted to share that artist for like two years. I’ve been sitting on that presentation because I was nervous. I, I finally was like, ‘Okay, I’m just gonna do it, and then go from there.’ But I always wonder, are there other questions or other ways I could lead that to make it more productive and maybe they’re getting out of it what I want them to get out of it. Which really, in this case, is that you can use your art to make a statement which I think, I think they were getting so I guess I feel good about that. But I think the specific, like difficult conversations about race piece … we didn’t have that, you know, we didn’t really talk about that part of it. I just kind of … I’m like more realizing this now even as we talk, that’s kind of—I kind of avoided that piece. I was more focused on the art piece. So, I think I was still being a little tiptoe-y.
Cora elaborated on how she interpreted the interaction but also considers how her bias or assumptions may have led to misunderstanding the student’s intentions. Initially, Cora was surprised by the student’s comment that caused laughter from the class because he was not white. Though it is difficult to know the student’s intention without talking to him directly, stereotyping, racism, and colorism are still pervasive among non-white groups of people and may have led to this student’s remark (Monk Jr., 2021). Regardless of whether the student’s statement was intentional or unintentional, it offered an opportunity to dig deeper and expand the conversation to address more clearly what was said.

Cora used critical reflexivity to pay attention to how she felt before, during, and after the lesson. At first, she was “nervous” to present the content and had waited multiple years to share it with her students. The current political climate has incited an onslaught of commentary and legal action surrounding educators’ curricular choices and desires to implement critical race theories and social justice topics in the classroom (Woo et al., 2023). This context may have contributed to her hesitation to talk about Adrian Brandon’s work. Talking through the lesson with Cora in a later interview brought about new ways of understanding the moments of tension that occurred (Hood & Travis, 2023). After acknowledging the types of questions she asked, Cora realized she “tiptoed” around directly addressing and scaffolding conversations about race in her lesson. Cora intended that this brief introduction to Brandon and his work expose her students to various forms of injustice, and she hopes to continue conversations exploring activist art during their next school year.

Cora stated during her interview that the goal of this lesson was to “expose students to artists using their work as activism.” Yet, her questioning did little to support this goal as she focused on students’ observations of the visual aspects of the artwork instead of helping them
understand how the artworks served as forms of activism. As she works toward alignment, there are opportunities for Cora to spend more time exploring the sociocultural contexts of Brandon’s work and the systems of oppression that exist to perpetuate racism and police brutality. It is important to note that although Cora wants to improve on this lesson in the future, she broke through an important barrier by scratching the surface with the topics addressed in Brandon’s work. It is incredibly difficult to navigate how to bring up issues of justice with students and lead them in productive conversations, especially when those skills have not been taught in pre-service arts education training (Erickson, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Though she is still learning how to create lessons that explore social issues, Cora is passionate about shifting the master narrative and engaging students in conversations and artmaking that centralize equity and justice.

**Critical Reflexivity When Addressing Missed Opportunities**

*In the second part of the lesson, Cora directed the students’ attention to the work of a new artist whose work differs stylistically and thematically from Brandon’s. One of the images depicted a colorful illustration of a red panda with a floral background. The other was a dolphin jumping out of bright blue water with orange roses and a pink sky behind it. The edges of each image resembled a stamp, with numbers and text in English and Hindi in the corners. Quickly, Cora asked the restless students, “What do you see? What do you see that makes you say that?” The students responded with answers like “animals”, “bright colors”, and “a different language.” Her pace quickened, and Cora flipped through a few slides about the artist, Anjali Mehta. She explained that the images are from the Enroute Extinction series and shared a quote from Mehta’s website stating the series is “an attempt to draw more awareness towards the*
beautiful animals we could lose forever in our near future if we do not work aggressively for their conservation of their lives and habitat” (Mehta, n.d.). Cora concluded the lesson and told the students that she was proud of their thinking and talking through difficult topics and artworks. She told the students that they could finish where they left off the week before, either finishing glazing their clay pieces or working on another artwork of their choice during open studio time.

During our interview after the lesson, Cora and I talked through the pace at which she taught the lesson and her decision to include two artists who make work about completely different subjects. She said that when she tested the lesson with her sixth-grade class, she did it on two separate days but trying to combine them “was too much for one class.” She also continued to critically reflect on her decision to include Anjali Mehta and her bright and colorful illustrations about endangered animal species. She said,

It also could have been more of my tiptoeing to kind of add that artist in so I didn’t bring it down too much. But if I’m thinking about my overall goal, then it probably maybe could have made sense to just do Adrian. Even with the fifth grade, even if that was the only one I could get to. I think part of me was afraid to just do him. And leave it.

The structure and pacing of the lesson gave Cora little time to go in-depth with either artist. She spent the first 20 minutes of the lesson on Brandon’s work, and only four on Mehta’s. Cora stated in the interview that the inclusion of the second artist was a means of tempering the lesson to “not bring it down too much,” and she pairs the topic of saving endangered species, one that could be seen as less “political” with that of police brutality and violence against Black bodies. Again, Cora used VTS questions, “What do you see?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?” that did little to get to the root of Mehta’s work. She offered a summary of the *Enroute*
The Extinction series posted on the artist’s website, yet she did not critically engage her students’ voices in their attempts to read the work.

It is unclear if the concepts and conversations that occurred during Cora’s instruction were continued during students’ artmaking time. Though it was the end of the school year, and not Cora’s intention to start a new project, the students had studio time to use the rest of the class how they wished. This structure of a brief demo followed by self-guided studio time is typical in Cora’s TAB studio, however, this could have communicated to the students that encountering information about social justice issues requires no organized follow-up action. In light of Cora’s perspective as a TAB teacher, she stated that because the lesson’s focus was on the Express Habit of Mind and using art to “make a statement” that “it’s likely the meaning-making did continue during studio time.” As she works with these students next year, Cora can check in with their understanding of the sociocultural concepts represented in Brandon’s art to build future artmaking opportunities.

During our second interview, Cora envisioned new ways to improve this lesson and build on it during the next school year. She named the difficulty of teaching and “living in a white dominant community” and questioned, “How can we bring these issues up and then unpack them so that these kids can learn about this?” Cora proposed digging deeper into “stereotypes” and acknowledged a greater need for the school community to recognize the importance of addressing social injustices throughout the curriculum. She stated a desire to intentionally create questions that will help guide students through the material in a more nuanced way. As she works to accomplish these things in the future, she must consider how to align her artist selections, scaffolded questions, projects, and pacing to reinforce her goals of developing a more culturally sustaining curriculum.
Section Discussion

Cora demonstrated multiple approaches to guide her students in interpreting various artworks. She used a transformative approach by including videos and quotes from the artists but was additive in the way she made references to sociocultural issues without engaging students to question the status quo (Link, 2022). Cora used a method of questioning adjacent to VTS to introduce the work of Adrian Brandon and Anjali Mehta to her students. She posed questions such as, “What does your eye see?” and “What does your mind see?”, but they did not lead to dialogue about students’ thoughts on the sociopolitical topics.

Cora consistently evaluates her teaching to work towards improving her practice (Brown, 2021; Link, 2022a). During an interview, she stated, “I’m usually kind of thinking of what, like, ‘Okay, that didn’t work today? What else can we do that would make it better?’… I have found, especially with TAB teaching, it’s a constant reflecting process.” This reflection process allowed her to engage in flashpoints that occurred in the lesson as she attempted to talk with her students about race and racism (Kraehe et al., 2015). Cora stated a desire to discuss heavier issues such as police brutality in her classroom but feels ill-equipped in her ability to unpack them in a way that her students can digest.

Cora’s lesson presented similarities to Lucy’s printmaking lesson from Chapter Four. Both Lucy and Cora used artists whose work reflected social justice issues that they wanted to address in their classrooms. However, by limiting the information given to students about the sociocultural context of the artists’ identities and their work to one lesson, the students’ artmaking was prioritized over meaningful dialogue. Instead, Kraehe (2010) advocates that having continued, “open dialogue about artists’ complex and fluctuating identities, as well as the
impact of those identities on the artists’ work and reception by the public, is essential for exploring inequities in society and in the arts” (p. 171). This is difficult to do as elementary art educators are constantly making decisions about how much time to allocate discussing artists and art history versus artmaking. Cora and Lucy’s lessons took place at the end of the year with little time for such content; however, in the future there are possibilities to extend the information taught about the artists over multiple class periods to give students time to access understanding of sociocultural concepts.

Additionally, there are similarities between Cora’s lesson and Frida’s landmarker project. When Frida asked her students if they thought the landmarker project was an example of cultural appropriation, she received few responses and moved on quickly to the clay demonstration. Giving students an appropriate amount of wait time to formulate responses as well as supplementing with additional questions helps prioritize the conversations that occur in the classroom, not just the art that is made. When Cora asked her students what they thought about the meaning behind Brandon’s work, there was little wait time and few other scaffolded questions that helped engage students in more dialogue. It is nearly impossible for educators to know if the questions they prepare will be successful, and what may work with some groups of students may not work with others. However, the more “entry points” (Brown, 2020) they offer through a variety of scaffolded questions, the more likely they will be able to facilitate meaningful conversations with their students.

**The Influence of the Master Narrative on Pedagogical Alignment**

Elementary art education often works to support the narrative that the accomplishments of white European artists ought to be highly regarded and reproduced (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). Throughout elementary curriculums are projects mimicking the work of Van Gogh,
Munch, Monet, and Mondrian. As culturally sustaining educators attempt to leave behind projects that reinforce the master narrative and instead those that focus on students’ lived experiences, there are often remnants that perpetuate notions of what constitutes a “good” art project. In the section below, Katina utilizes art prompts that reflect students’ identities and lived experiences, yet the final project reflects the style of Picasso. The pedagogical misalignment in her curricular choices offers opportunities to examine how student voice is engaged or stifled.

“Where I’m From”

During our artifact-solicited interview, Katina discussed a monochromatic portrait project based on poems authored by her fifth-grade students. She uses a template modeled after George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” poem (Figure 3) in which students must fill in information describing “where they live, how it smelled, [how it sounded], how it looked, and how they felt” in addition to other identifying information such as “family names” and traits. After writing their poems, the students create a “cubist style” abstract portrait using a monochromatic color scheme based on the emotions included in the poem. Katina enjoys this project because it gives her students a chance to “tell their story” while making connections to “themselves, their family, and their culture.”

On the first day of the project, Katina teaches her students about “Picasso and the different periods.” Katina discusses what various colors in his work “meant” and focuses on the Blue Period as “his depressed state.” She said she shows a “cartoony” video about “what kind of person he was” and “how he was raised.” Katina said that the students must understand, “You learn about the artist and who does the art before [you] do a project; no matter what somebody inspired it or created it.” Then she informs the students that they will complete a “Where I’m
“From” poem that shares different aspects of their identities like their homes, families, traditions, birthplace, significant foods, and memorable household items. Katina mentioned that she reads an example of a completed poem by a young girl, then shows a video in which the girl voices over clips that depict lines from her poem. Katina said her goal in showing the video is to provide “an example of hearing [and] seeing how the poem comes to life.”

Katina noted she takes time during the second half of the lesson to go over the template that includes blanks for students to fill in their descriptors. For example, one line of the template reads, “I am from (family tradition) and (family trait)/ I am from the (home description), (adjective), (adjective), (sensory detail).” Katina said that most of her students “don’t know their parts of speech” so she takes time to review an “English portion for 10 minutes.” Students then receive their poem templates, and they begin to fill in the blanks. Katina allows students to work by themselves or in groups to “help each other understand words” that may be included in the template. When I asked Katina if any students struggle with writing the poem linguistically or emotionally, she responded, “They won’t say but you can tell. Like they’re not getting started but what I do after I notice that is pull up … on the smartboard a list of adjectives, a list of verbs and just leave ‘em there.”

During the second class period, students begin to practice creating monochromatic color schemes, “learning how to do tints and shades.” Students experiment using the primary colors, black, and white, but Katina emphasized that eventually, they will choose one color that represents the emotions depicted in their poem for when they paint their portraits. When the students return for the third class, they begin to “create the final self-portrait” with abstracted proportions and features. The students draw prior knowledge from earlier in the year when they learned about proportional and abstracted portraits. Katina informs them when they draw the
portrait it must “touch the top or be close to the top and has to touch the bottom so that they fill out the paper.” Katina reported that the process of finishing the portrait in pencil takes a few more classes. The final stage of the project is painting in the different areas of the portrait created by lines drawn across the paper. Katina said that though they can choose any color, “most [students] use blue because it was a sad period” in their lives. The painting process “takes three or four classes,” and Katina displays the finished work in the hallway with the completed poem if the students feel comfortable.

Katina shared that one of the core motivations behind showing her students Picasso’s Blue Period is wanting “them to be able to express themselves when they’re sad without getting angry or lashing out.” She wants to show them, “You can always write a poem and you can draw in your sketchbook.” At one of her previous schools, she says that she focused on “just blue because it was just trauma everywhere.” She hoped to create a safe space for students to express their emotions, letting them know, “You can get it out. You don’t have to show anybody your poem.” Katina spoke of an incredibly meaningful experience doing this project with a past group of students. One of her students thrived in the art room but was often misunderstood in other classes and viewed as “terrible” by other teachers. Katina stated that her “principal was afraid” of him. Yet, she saw another side of the student when he was in art, saying that he was “great” and was often engaged in his projects. When he completed his poem template for the project, Katina said she was amazed at the detail he included about his life and how vulnerable he was about his experiences. A copy of this poem hangs behind her desk to this day. A de-identified excerpt of his poem reads:

I am from Lafayette, Louisiana
From Robin Jeans and Forces
I am from the Oak Ridge Rivertree Apartments
(It’s always live and whatever,  
the same everywhere in Lafayette  
and a better Drama, but live)  
It felt like trustworthy love  
I am from the fancy, love, life, loyalty  
from The Family  
I’m from the keep others out of our circle  
Trust issues, we do things alone  
And we like to just chill to be honest  
I’m from Latasha and Marcus Brown  
And Shonda Martin  
I’m from the underground, the gutter  
And going to different cities  
From that I won’t ever be nothing  
And ima be just like my Daddy  
The student felt safe to express intimate details about his family through the poem’s lyrics. The template structure and Katina’s classroom culture of vulnerability (Willcox, 2017) provided simultaneous support and freedom for him to share his story. This project sample particularly impacted Katina because it allowed her to see inside the student’s world and better understand his identity and voice.

Katina concluded our interview by stating, “That project for five weeks, all about them is great. They focus so much on it because—I don’t care if it’s an abstract picture or not. They have to try to do their best because they’re representing themselves.” The students demonstrate unique ownership in this project compared to others in Katina’s curriculum because it reflects who they are. The content of the poems and the portraits physically and emotionally represent the students, which draws out special care as they work on and display them.
Whose Story is it?

Katina sees and feels the pain of her students and desires to create opportunities for them to bring their stories into her classroom. She acknowledges the lived experiences of her students, including their trauma, and wants to help them process their emotions through their artwork. By utilizing the poem structure, Katina offers direct opportunities for her students to communicate about their families, traditions, and personality traits. Often her students volunteer personal information that goes well beyond their daily interactions, offering Katina more insight into her students’ lived experiences. She works hard to build a space where students feel valued, nurtured, and successful, despite their experiences in other classes.

Katina scaffolds learning throughout the project to meet students’ specific needs. She offers multiple poem examples to help students envision the result of the project. She supports them by providing access to lists of adjectives and adverbs as they compose their poems with attunement to their reading levels. Katina encourages the students to work together, bridging gaps in their knowledge while composing their poems. She also uses sketchbooks for students to reference lessons from earlier in the year as they begin to draw their portraits. Katina’s use of relational knowledge of her students throughout instruction helps her to better address their needs as they create in her classroom.

Though Katina provides an opportunity for students to use their voices when writing their poems, the final project is still largely centered on Picasso and his cubist style. The poem template engages students in ways that are individualized and personal, yet the project takes a hard pivot as the composition of their poems is followed by painting a portrait modeled after Picasso’s Blue Period and Cubist era. The content of the students’ poems is not reflected in the paintings they create beyond a color that represents an emotion. The decision to have students
create portraits in this style of art is reflective of the greater structure of art education that prioritizes Eurocentric art from “old masters” (Efland et al., 1996; Kraehe, 2010). During an interview, Katina emphasized a personal goal of working to help her students “cultivate creativity” in their artwork. By determining the final representation of the students’ poems through the Picasso-style portraits, she denies students the opportunity to creatively decide how they want to depict the content of their poems.

There are opportunities Katina can explore as she continues to teach this project that demonstrate greater alignment between the poem portion of the project and the visual art students produce to represent it. Katina stated that she loves this project because it encourages students to “tell their story” while revealing insight into “themselves, their family, and their culture.” For students to be able to do this in the artmaking portion of the project, they could illustrate a stanza from their poem depicting information about their families. Students could play with adding text from their poems to accompany the visual representations of their stories in the portrait. Students might even create a portrait of a specific family member mentioned in their poem, choosing to depict their character traits through imagery.

The current project structure does not give students time to discuss, explore, and reflect on the content of the poems which could help students brainstorm ways to continue their storytelling through their art. Scaffolding strategic questions such as “What does family mean to you?”, “How is storytelling a part of your culture?”, or “How have the character traits of your family shaped your identity?” may support students in writing their poems while also connecting with others and further developing the relational climate of the classroom. The use of tools such as questioning and providing students with more choices in the visual aspects of the project offer opportunities to develop increased pedagogical alignment.
Chapter Discussion

The educators featured in this chapter showed a range of pedagogical alignment when actualizing their goals for their curricula. Some educators were able to design projects and lessons that incorporated the study of artists, conversations about their work, and artmaking processes for a unified purpose. For example, in Aqua’s silkscreen project, the artists of study, dialogue about artists, and the artmaking process all center around activism. For other participants, it was more disjointed. Cora wanted to engage her predominantly white students on topics such as racism and police brutality. However, while one of the artists she showed her students made work directly about these issues, the other made work about endangered animal species. Trying to cover both artists in the same lesson minimized the time for meaningful and sustained dialogue. Art teachers’ preservice training and continued education rarely provide opportunities to name injustice within oppressive institutions and study how it affects the process of teaching and learning in today’s classrooms (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Therefore, teachers struggle to have sustained dialogue with their students about how to identify these injustices (de Saxe & Trotter-Simons, 2021). As Cora continues to grow in her knowledge of systemic injustices and her ability to scaffold discomfort (Link, 2022), she will be better prepared to conduct conversations with her students that give them more time to successfully comprehend complex sociocultural concepts.

Aqua’s community advocate silkscreen project elicits intentional and strategic planning from her students. As they examine the artwork of Dignidad Rebelde and Ester Hernandez, students can not only visualize the silkscreen process but also learn how artists advocate through their art. The students followed a similar process by naming a community problem, and a
solution, and developing a slogan that represented their stance on a particular sociopolitical issue. Aqua reinforces the perspective of student voice as “the initiating force in an inquiry process which invites teachers’ involvement as facilitating and enabling partners in learning” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201). By guiding students in the processes of discussion, research, brainstorming, and artmaking through a lens of activism, Aqua demonstrated pedagogical alignment relaying her social action approach to art education.

Cora’s use of critical reflexivity to examine flashpoints from her lesson helped her move towards greater pedagogical alignment. Cora actively considered the ways bias and her identity as a white woman affected the execution of her lesson during times that felt strained or uncomfortable. Whiteness and its effect on curriculum and instruction in art education are under-researched (Buffington, 2019; Knight, 2006a; Link, 2019), and educators’ avoidance of confronting whiteness and white supremacy contribute to its prevailing power in society today (Buffington, 2019; Desai, 2010; Knight, 2006a). However, as Cora attempted to understand why certain aspects of her lesson were difficult, she grapples with the role of her whiteness and the distribution of power in her classroom. Cora’s use of the TAB teaching method is largely student-centered when it comes to her students’ artmaking, but the discussion time during her lesson was largely teacher-centered. As she names her positionality and continues to dive deeper into sociopolitical issues, Cora can better scaffold students to lead class discussions and utilize their voices not only during artmaking but during critical conversations as well.

Some aspects of Katina’s portrait project make genuine connections with students’ lifeworlds, yet others limit their artistic choice and voice. Katina’s relational knowledge of her students is invaluable as she provides a space where students feel known and encouraged (Filbin, 2021; Gross, 2020; Pierce, 2020). When students express their identities through the poem
template, they thrive by taking an opportunity to tell their stories. However, as they begin
drawing their portraits, the priority shifts to rendering themselves through a Picasso-style lens.
This is representative of the normalized overexposure to the Western canon Overby et al. (2022)
discussed as their students voiced a lack of relatability to the artists centered in the curriculum.
As Katina moves forward in developing increased pedagogical alignment, she can consider
encouraging students’ authority to determine what their art projects will look like and how to
best illustrate their poems.

Throughout this chapter, I have described the range of pedagogical alignment the art
educators demonstrated during interviews and classroom observations. To understand why art
educators showed, as stated in Chapter Four, a range of critical sociocultural knowledge and why
educators have difficulty engaging such knowledge while teaching and making curricular
decisions, it is necessary to depict the habitus of art education. In the next chapter, I will discuss
the visible and invisible barriers that make growth in sociocultural understanding and culturally
sustaining pedagogical practice in art education so challenging.
Chapter Six: The Habitus of Art Education

Link (2022) stated that although it is often inconspicuous, “the habitus of art education is at work shaping the thoughts and practices of individual art educators as well as the institutions they participate in” (p. 42). To understand the participants’ teaching contexts, curricular choices, and the tensions explored in this dissertation, it is important to depict the role of the habitus of art education. Bourdieu (1995) is credited with forwarding theory using the concept of “habitus”, referring to it as “the principle of a selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it” (p. 43). In other words, habitus is a biased interpretation of systems and structures that support and validate such systems rather than change them.

According to Link (2022b) the habitus in the field of art education “reaffirm[s] white knowledge, cultural norms, speech, and behaviors as normal and best practices … preserving cultural hegemony” (p. 257). She indicates that the habitus is a multi-level, multi-faceted force. For example, during preservice instruction, art educators are taught to limit “critical conversations about race, culture, and power … promoting models of elementary art teaching as apolitical” (p. 258). Then as in-service teachers, they utilize formal and informal curricular materials that reinforce the Western canon with projects based on Eurocentric, formalist art (Kraehe, 2010) or offer appropriative, hegemonic representations of various cultures. In her study, Link also emphasized the controlling nature of administrators and legislators who “patrolled the racialized speech and critical dialogues teachers engaged in, creating a culture of fear and surveillance that chilled substantive sociocultural dialogue” (p. 258). As educators operate within a system of expectations that uphold these attributes, it can be very difficult to implement pedagogies that align with teaching practices that dismantle this habitus.
The overarching tensions explored in the previous two chapters are a result of the art educators’ attempts to diverge from the habitus of art education. As art educators work to develop increased critical sociocultural knowledge bases for scaffolding better pedagogical alignment, some tensions reinforce their struggles. They include the knowledge differences between art educators and their administrators, the perpetuation of building curriculums around media exposure and the elements of art, and the lack of quality resources that help art educators dismantle the master narrative. This chapter will explore these tensions and offer points of analysis for why it is so difficult for elementary art educators to develop culturally sustaining pedagogies.

**Pressure to Defend Curricular Choices to Administration**

The elementary art educators in the study discussed experiences of little support, scarcity of arts-related knowledge, and surveillance from their administrators. While assimilating to the habitus of art education, educators often feel pressure to defend their curricular decisions to administrators and district officials. To explore these experiences, Hanawalt (2018) studied the “audit culture” impacting art educators due to federal and educational policies enforced in public schools. She found after interviewing first and second-year art educators, that cultures of accountability and compliance in schools impacted the educators’ abilities to actualize curricula that diverged from the traditional, formalism-centric, school art style. Hanawalt stated, “Developing new visions of curricula might not be enough to understand the persistence of predominant versions of school art or to see change take root in schools” (p. 91). This section will explore the ways participants’ curricular goals were often hindered due to administrative
limitations, making it increasingly difficult for art educators to implement culturally sustaining pedagogies.

As art educators strive to grow in their teaching practices, they need support from knowledgeable and experienced others within the school setting. Because many schools employ only a part-time or one full-time art teacher, there may not be anyone else in the building who is trained in art education. This presents issues as art teachers attempt to advocate for curricular resources or endure teaching evaluations with administrators whose expertise is in another subject area. During interviews, both Lucy and Katina expressed frustration with their administrators’ lack of arts-based knowledge. When I asked what the most difficult part of her job as an art teacher was, Lucy described dealing with past administrators who “were very inexperienced,” and she felt they “shouldn’t be in charge of [her].” Katina stated that during one of her classroom observations, her evaluator “didn’t know [she] had a curriculum,” leaving her feeling disheartened and unsupported. This isolation and frustration can make it difficult for art educators to develop skills such as utilizing critical sociocultural knowledge and practicing pedagogical alignment because they don’t have access to arts-based resources or experts who can help them.

Not only do art educators struggle to gain access to critically-minded peers, but their administrators often assess them through measures that fail to adequately represent their professionalism. Whether through traditional evaluations conducted by non-arts trained administrators using non-arts-based rubrics or growth portfolios based on student achievement, educators must find ways to perform within incongruous standards (Shaw, 2016). Often, general education teachers in tested subjects are given a Level of Effectiveness (LOE) based on their teaching evaluations and their students’ performances on standardized tests. Because elementary
students are not tested in art, some districts require another type of individual measure for art teachers’ yearly LOE. For Katina, 30% of her LOE is based on a student growth portfolio. During an interview, Katina explained her feelings about the portfolio she must submit to her state education department.

Katina: We also have to do a growth portfolio.

Addy: Right. And that’s unique to the Davis County district in the area.

Katina: And we [in a growl] haaaaatte iiit!!

Addy: And every person I have ever heard who has to do it feels exactly the same way.

Katina: Because it’s—it’s, I could be judging your portfolio.

Addy: Right!

Katina: And it’s based on your PowerPoint that you send. It’s based on if you can show me in one slide how the student grew and is based on what you say, and it was so confusing. I’ve been doing it for five or six years. But it’s so confusing every year. So now that I’ve gotten one where I got a good grade, every year I just make sure I do those four projects … And I was so confused at first because I thought portfolio meant quality work. So, I wasn’t showing any growth. I was showing, “Oooh, look at the portfolio!” So, I had to learn that.

The student growth portfolio presumes that growth is linear and can be visually demonstrated in a few ‘before and after’ images of student art. This method of evaluation aligns with the culture of DBAE that considers students’ artistic growth as when they can better represent the elements and principles of art (Efland, 1976; Gude, 2013). For example, this may look like students drawing more proportionally, using shading to make their work more realistic, or demonstrating more neatness by staying in the lines. The portfolio measures the teachers’ “worth based on
students’ technical production skills” (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 824), rather than their abilities to teach idea generation, visual literacy, and communication through art. It also does little to demonstrate what is happening in the classroom such as scaffolded discussions about art, student-teacher relationships, and how educators build and maintain the art classroom environment. From Katina’s description of what she submits each year for review, neither students’ thinking nor their class discussions play a role in determining her effectiveness as an art educator. This also leads to rigidity in how she thinks about what projects to teach. To perform well on her portfolio and therefore her LOE, she wants to repeat the projects she knows score well. This leaves little room to dream and envision the ways she can bring more sociopolitical context and rich classroom conversations to her students’ art education.

“No One Gets What You Do Like Another Elementary Art Teacher”

Some art educators in the study mentioned performing tasks of a district arts lead or liaison in addition to their normal teaching responsibilities. This includes tasks such as evaluating other teachers, creating and presenting professional development opportunities, and overseeing curricular decision-making. During an interview, Cora reflects on her district’s lack of an arts lead and the resulting requirement of another art educator to do her evaluations.

I think because we currently don’t have an art direct—like a visual arts director because ours left last year. And then with budget cuts, we’re not getting one. We just have a liaison but it’s my colleague who’s amazing and I actually got to be evaluated by an elementary art teacher this year. So, it was kind of amazing to get actual, like really valid feedback. I’ve gotten great feedback before from administrators, but there’s no one that gets what you do like another elementary art teacher.
These extra responsibilities are normalized and praised, yet they keep educators from accessing resources, learning experiences, and knowledge from those outside of the district. Cora was elated to have someone evaluate her who understood her day-to-day experiences. Because the other art educator had experience and training in the arts, they were able to give Cora relevant feedback. This interaction demonstrates the limitations art educators experience as they must often solely rely on one another for relevant resources and feedback yet answer to administrators or district office personnel who make final decisions about their curricula, resources, and professionalism.

In Frida’s experience, when administrators or district officials attempted to surveil or regulate her art curriculum, they lacked a nuanced understanding of her curriculum. Frida is the elementary art PLC coach and facilitates meetings with other art educators in her district. During an interview, Frida described an interaction with her district office that required her to make sure all the art teachers in her district were teaching the same thing when she requested equal compensation for being an FTE (Full Time Employee).

The art FTE was half of what Music and PE was, and then they just made them equal in every building. And when they did that, the district office was like, “Okay, well, we need to know what you’re teaching and all the buildings have to be teaching the same thing.” And we’re like, “Okay, we’re teaching the elements of art”… and they’re like, “Oh, okay, well, that sounds good.” [Both Frida and Addy laugh] But they just, they don’t know anything about art education.

To get compensation for her work as an FTE that was equivalent to other subjects, Frida had to prove to her central office that there was uniformity in the art curriculums of all the art teachers in the district. Frida issued a blanket statement to appease the district officials because she knew
they would be satisfied with the response that all art educators would teach the elements of art. This not only reinforces the idea that the elements of art continue to prevail as the gold standard of art education (Gude, 2004) but also that the officials did not realize how different the art educators’ curricula could look while still teaching under the umbrella of the elements and principles.

**Dependence on the Elements and Principles for Structuring the Curriculum**

Though some art educators are breaking away from DBAE practices, the elements of art and principles of design remain as one of the core foundations for structuring curricula (Gude, 2004, 2013; Link, 2019; Pierce, 2020). Several of the participants in the study mentioned prioritizing contemporary artists and doing social justice projects, yet still felt obligated to expose students to various mediums and teach elements like line, shape, color, and texture. Gude (2004) sheds light on this pressure as she explains the content of art education textbooks around the turn of the 20th century: “The elements and principles are presented as the essence of art making … reified in print, achieving theoretical unity, not through persuasive argument, but through seemingly endless repetition in formally oriented textbooks” (p. 6). This section will exemplify how the constant and ingrained exposure to the elements and principles has shaped the culture of pre-service and K–12 art education, influencing the ways the participants conceptualize their curricula.

Art educators often develop curricula for various grade levels without any formal guide offered by their district or state (The Art of Education University, 2022). Therefore, there are layers of decisions that go into what is included or seen as necessary for elementary art education. When I asked Frida in an interview how she develops her curriculum, she said,
I always start with what I want them to learn, and like how relevant it is to their life. And
then I kind of work backwards from there. I have no district curriculum at all. Um, so I
just frame everything around the elements of art, and then I make sure I just figure out
what technique and element that the”re going to learn. And then I work backwards from
there and then I pull resources.

Because she has no curriculum, Frida leans on the elements of art to give herself some sort of
structure, but she also wants to choose topics that are relevant to students’ lives (Sabol, 2000).
When educators create or select a project based on an element such as line, it can be difficult to
prioritize studying attributes such as sociocultural context or the influence of the artist’s identity.
This often results in “cookie cutter” projects that are representative of the school art style
because they mostly look the same with little individuality from student to student (Efland,
1976). For example, the project Frida initially selected for her observation (detailed in Chapter
Four) was to have her students create totem poles using various animals of their choice. The
focus of the project would have been on students’ drawings and their use of the elements and
principles in a way that represented generalized, stereotypical copies of Native Art (Acuff,
2014a). However, as Frida shifted her lesson design she emphasized discussion, sociocultural
context, and students creating landmarks that told the stories of their experiences on the
Kalapuya land. Frida’s lesson became much more dynamic and complex as she aimed the
students’ focus beyond the elements of art and the students’ final products.

Later in the interview, Frida said sometimes when developing projects, “it’s hard to find a
connection. You know, like you really want them to experience a certain technique … and then
it’s just sometimes we just have to do the technique and not have it be connected to anything.”
This is where art educators can often feel stuck in not knowing how to build a more critical,
culturally sustaining practice because their focus is still on teaching the elements and principles or various techniques first. When I questioned Frida further if she felt like she had to teach the elements and principles, she responded,

I feel like professionally I have to, but they’re so vague like everything is all of them all of the time, like, so um. I don’t feel like I have—I mean, I guess it’s 50/50. Yeah, I feel like I have to use it but it also—because I don’t have a curriculum, it gives me something.

This response helps depict why pedagogical alignment in art education can be so difficult to practice. When educators have inherited through the habitus of art education what they feel they ought to teach, which is also reinforced by what peers are teaching and what is most easily available online, it is hard to shift to more contemporary, critically oriented projects. As many of my participants have spent over a decade structuring their school year on the elements of art, it can be arduous to set them down to create new goals, especially those that support the attributes of a culturally sustaining pedagogy. Art educators can only prioritize so much in the time that they have with their students; therefore, they must examine if their curricular decisions align with their overarching goals and teaching philosophies.

**Exposure to a Variety of Mediums**

Similarly to structuring the curriculum on the elements and principles of art, sometimes art educators focus on exposing students to a plethora of mediums throughout the year (The Art of Education University, 2022). Oftentimes, this mentality is paired with prioritizing breadth over depth. Though it is helpful to try and give students several entry points to making art through various materials, art educators who focus on exposing students to as many mediums as possible can impede opportunities for students to bring depth to their work. It can also make it
more difficult to provide time for students to learn about and discuss more complex topics. For example, Aqua’s social justice printmaking project discussed in Chapter Five takes her fifth-grade students an entire semester to learn about the artist-activist group, Dignidad Rebelde, brainstorm specific community problems and solutions, and develop their own prints advocating for change. Though not all of her projects are so extensive, Aqua utilizes rich discussions and meaning-making as a frequent part of her teaching practice. In an interview, Cora depicted the tension of teaching her students about a variety of materials while also helping students impart more meaning to their work.

[C]urrently, I try to get through at least drawing, collage, paint, and sculpture, whether that’s clay or cardboard or both, every year with every grade. Moving forward, I hope to have fibers and also digital is something we do with the older kids as well … but moving forward, I think more materials will be opened right away and it won’t be as much about the material opening it will be more about digging deeper … now that they’re used to kind of the studio vibe and studio time and the routines, I think moving forward for the older kids, it’s going to be more about digging deeper into like maybe the Express habit showing activist art which is what I hope to do.

This begs the question, do students have to show mastery of media before they can create art to express? As elementary art classes may be some students’ first exposure to different types of art materials, there is a necessary component of exploration and investigation. However, leaning exclusively into this aspect can limit possibilities to scaffold learning for social action or transformative approaches to art education (Link, 2022b). If an art educator’s main goal is to teach as many mediums as possible, it is difficult to also prioritize decentering dominant perspectives or critically examining problems for students to explore in their work.
Like Cora, Lucy also described herself as a “media-based” art teacher. She often looks at her curriculum across grade levels to determine what experiences students have had and how she can shape projects to give them new materials to work with. During an interview, she stated,

I’m only in my second year at my current school but, my old school I’d be like, “They’re in like, you know, they’re in third grade and they haven’t gotten printmaking yet. I have to give them some kind of printmaking … I’m interested in social justice and things like that. So I’m kind of thinking about how I can sort of impart that in different ways, like, not every unit. But yeah, just definitely thinking about that.

Lucy talked about prioritizing students trying most mediums throughout their years with her. As she continues to grow in her teaching practice, she contemplates how to include matters of social justice in her curriculum. These intentions can come off as competing, in which one must be prioritized over the other. An example of this can be drawn from her social justice printmaking lesson in Chapter Four. Her engagement with students about Justyne Fischer, and her print Two Seconds, was brief. Though I only observed one lesson, the majority of instruction and questioning was spent on students’ understanding of preparing for utilizing the process of printmaking. As she attempts to strike the balance between showing her students a variety of materials and digging deeper into sociocultural contexts, she must continually assess what shapes her opinions on what students should know and be able to do by the time they go to middle school.

**Effects of the Master Narrative on Curricular Decision-Making**

Recurring projects taught in the elementary art classroom evidence the master narrative’s stronghold on the curriculum. Art curricula and lessons can silence, deculturalize, and erase the
works of artists not present in the master narrative (Acuff, 2018). When facts or stories from other cultures are included in multicultural art curricula, they are typically “whitewashed,” or presented from the viewpoint of the dominant culture (Kraehe et al., 2018; Sions & Wolfgang, 2021). These resources obstruct individual narratives and, in the process, silence the voices of the cultures they purport to be promoting (Acuff, 2014a). This section will examine why the participants felt obligated to teach “master” artists and how strong desires to introduce their students to more diverse, contemporary artists have led to changes in their curricula.

Initially, when I asked Frida how she determines which artists to teach, she stated that she prioritizes representing her student population by curating artists who look like them. During an interview, she also mentioned students’ prior exposure to well-known artists.

I always try to dig a little bit deeper than just like the most famous well-known people because they get exposed to that out in the world … they’ve all seen the Mona Lisa\(^3\) somewhere, you know what I mean? It’s like everywhere.

Frida acknowledged the prevalence of artworks such as the Mona Lisa and the far-reaching nature of works from the master narrative. Desiring to “dig deeper,” Frida expresses an intention to introduce her students to lesser-known artists. Yet in the same interview, when I asked her about some of the projects she teaches each year she said,

[T]he third grade always does The Great Wave\(^4\) … The fifth grade does like clay Picasso faces. They kind of—so kind of a culmination of all the years of them working with clay


in that one piece. And then the fourth grade does The Scream\(^5\), which is really fun …
y they look forward to stuff like that. Oh, the fourth grade does the embossing foil Aztec
suns.

Each of these projects reinforces the master narrative and DBAE. The projects on Picasso and
Munch centralize the work of deceased European white men. The replication of Aztec suns
homogenizes a people group often placing them in the past. These projects communicate
messages about whose art is worth learning about and replicating. The types of projects Frida
describes have been perpetuated in art education and art educational resources for decades.

Referencing articles published in the popular art education resource magazine, SchoolArts, Kader
(2005) states, “From its inception, practitioners of the DBAE philosophy went off-track by
overemphasizing the western canon and marginalizing less dominant cultures … Learning about
cultures other than one’s own should not be synonymous with copying or replication” (p. 80). As
many of the articles written in SchoolArts over the past several decades have focused on
materials, the Western canon, and homogenizing representation of cultures, Kader emphasizes
the need for art educators to focus on sociocultural contextual information about artists and their
work. Yet this is often what art educators struggle to do.

“Can I Teach it?”

Because of the prominence of the master narrative in art education and little experience
learning about artists of color, teachers often lack confidence in creating lessons about
contemporary artists and issues. During our first interview, Katina addressed her experience as a

Black teacher having little exposure to artists of color and feeling compelled to teach “out of the book.”

Addy: Do you ever do projects that are specifically social justice-oriented or where you talk about race and racism with your kids?

Katina: Umm, you know, I’m gonna be honest. I am going to. Okay, so it’s hard, okay, as a Black teacher, I was just teaching out of the book and there was no Black artists in the book.

Addy: Right! Yes.

Katina: Well, there, there are but it’s like a few. But Jean Basquiat wasn’t in the book. It may have been because maybe it was too vulgar to put in the book. I don’t know. But now like I took—what I do is I take the curriculum during the summer, and I look up Black artists because our curriculum doesn’t say, you know, you have to use these artists … at first I was like, “I don’t know if I can [show] this.” Honestly, as a grown-up, I was like, because the rooms I’ve been in I didn’t see, you know this art. So now I have Picasso. I have Black art … the teacher has to get used to teaching … Black social stuff too. Because we’ve been like, “Can I teach it?” You know? And nobody said we couldn’t it was just like—I wasn’t taught about Black artists in school. I just wasn’t sure if I could do it. I was a new teacher. I was like, let me just stick to like Picasso. Let me stick to like, you know, Michelangelo. Let me just stick to the masters. Nobody said, “Oh, this artist is better.” I was just like, “Can I, can I teach it?”
Katina emphasized a culture within art education that prioritizes the work of old masters. As she began teaching, she felt a pressure to conform her lessons to mimic those from her preservice training or what she calls “teaching out of the book.” In her experiences as a child and as a preservice educator, Katina had little exposure to Black artists in school and now is grappling with how to include them in her curriculum. She felt more secure teaching artists like Picasso and Michelangelo because they were the most accepted and celebrated among art educators as foundational to a ‘quality art education’ (Dobbs, 2004). Katina specifically points out the coercive nature of the habitus of art education stating no one verbalized certain artists were “better” than others, yet her education caused her to reproduce the same teaching patterns that prioritize white artists (Acuff, 2018).

Katina addressed the difficulty of teaching “Black social stuff” as a Black educator. Because of her limited exposure to Black art in school, she did not see examples or gain experience on how to develop art projects that engage the nuances of the sociopolitical contexts some Black artists express. As a new teacher this led Katina to question if and how Black art belonged in the curriculum. It is unclear in the exchange above if Katina feels uncomfortable incorporating Black artists solely because she “didn’t see [them]” in the “rooms [she’s] been in” or if the threat of backlash about certain topics plays a role as well. As teachers across the country fear repercussions for teaching content that is rooted in CRT, they must navigate how to teach in ways that still dismantle whiteness in the curriculum while keeping their jobs. It is important to note that the stakes for Katina as a non-white educator to dismantle the master narrative in her teaching are often much higher than for a white educator. The tensions Katina feels as she continues to develop her curriculum and focus on more artists of color stem directly from the perpetuation of the “arts as white property” (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018).
The exchange with Katina from above connects to her Picasso-style portrait project detailed in chapter four. Although she seeks to develop projects that feature Black artists, address sociocultural issues, and highlight the identities of her students, the feeling of having to teach the “masters” prevails. The addition of a Picasso-style portrait to represent students’ Where I Belong poems perpetuates the style and voice of Picasso instead of engaging her students to create artwork that tells their stories. As she continues to grapple with what artists to teach in her curriculum, she must examine what pressures influence her curricular decisions and why. As she strives to center her students’ voices to cultivate creativity and artistic autonomy, Katina can explore which artists will best help her students practice such skills.

“Think Like an Artist”

Aqua offers a different perspective as she strives to dismantle the habitus of art education by teaching mostly “women”, “women of color” and “queer artists” as the foundation of her curriculum. During an interview, she offered insight as to how she utilizes the work of artists to impact her students’ thinking, not to copy their style or content.

I’ll use like art talk as an intro. Like I’ll have a piece of artwork up and the kids will be talking about it, not always but sometimes. I do tend to start kind of with like, art history or some information about the artist and then we talk kind of—like we talk about studio habits of mind, and like, what the artist’s approach was, and we think about their approach. I’m not big on super copying artists or like super, the kids’ work it—looks exactly like the artist’s work. I’m trying to get them to think like an artist. So like when we do our Basquiat unit, um in second grade, we study Jean-Michel Basquiat, and we talk about how he uses words and images to tell a story. And the kids do that. But if you look
at their artwork, some of them their art is much more neat and tidy and you wouldn’t be able to tell it was studying Basquiat, but they’re still internalizing some of his strategies or his messages or his approach, you know? But they’re doing it in their style. And then some kids are interested in that kind of like messy or more wild style and it’s liberating for them, and they feel like they don’t have to be so neat and tidy or like judge their work so hard, this or that.

Aqua elaborated that one of her goals is to not have students copy the work of the artists they study, rather it is to embrace the approach or mindset they utilize when making their work. She prioritizes giving students background information and often poses an essential question. During the interview, Aqua stated that in their Basquiat unit, she asked, “What story do you want to tell?” By offering students this prompt for their artwork instead of mimicking the artist, Aqua gives students the opportunity to use their voices. The act of selecting Basquiat as a queer, Black artist and having students approach his work thematically diverges from the traditional art curriculum which often perpetuates the master narrative. It also puts more responsibility on the students during their artmaking to decide what they want to create while also considering essential questions. By prompting students’ thinking instead of telling them exactly how to make their work, Aqua respects her students’ artistic voices (Cook-Sather, 2020; Howe & Lisi, 2014).

Scarcity of Quality, Critical, Arts-Based Curricular Resources

As the art educators in the study shared their teaching experiences and curriculum designs, one repeated finding was the educators’ choices to develop their own lessons and expressing frustration with how time-consuming it was. All but one participant had a district-offered curriculum, meaning that most had to determine what to teach, how to teach, and where
to find supplemental resources. This paired with the fact that it is incredibly difficult to find non-appropriative, contemporary, and socioculturally-minded resources (Acuff, 2014a) sometimes left educators wondering how best to design lessons that put culturally sustaining pedagogy into practice (Ladson-Billings, 2011). This section investigates the educators’ desires to write their own lessons, frustrations with a lack of contemporary, diverse art resources for elementary education, and what they feel is needed to develop a culturally sustaining art curriculum.

When writing their lessons, the art educators cited the difficulty and time-consuming nature of finding resources for instruction. During an interview, Aqua described her preference stating, “For the most part, I just like to write my own lessons and teach my own lessons. Sometimes I dig myself into a hole cause’ I’m like, ‘Oh, this is a lot harder to write my own lesson.’” Similarly, Frida stated, “Sometimes I put more work into finding stuff than if I just did it myself [laughing]. And then I end up just making it myself.” As the educators attempted to search for PowerPoints, artists and artworks, and ideas for what their students could create, they often struggled to find suitable resources and therefore ended up making them themselves. Not only is it difficult to find resources, but those most commonly available on platforms such as Pinterest or art supply sites often highlight the work of the old masters (Acuff, 2014a; Acuff et al., 2012; Buffington & Bryant, 2019).

In her study on lesson plans and resources available on popular art supply websites, Acuff (2014a) found three major tensions in their content. First, cultures were often homogenized as several groups of people were often put under one umbrella such as ‘African’ or ‘Asian’ art, with no respect to individual identity. Second, cultural representations were stagnant, placing groups of people in the past. Third, the lesson plans demonstrated an additive approach to multicultural art education by highlighting cultures for certain ‘holidays and heroes’ such as
Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Día de los Muertos, and Martin Luther King Jr. Acuff (2014a) draws attention to the discrepancy between the critical oriented scholarship around curricular decision-making in art education and what many online resources are offering. The homogenizing, misrepresentative, and additive nature of these resources not only normalizes the narratives perpetuated in these lessons but makes it difficult for educators to access and recognize culturally sustaining materials. This struggle was present in Frida’s desire to change her totem pole lesson that she had done for years. It is also seen in the ways educators such as Katina and Cora wanted to move away from traditional resources and artists to those that represented the diversity of their students.

“Windows and Mirrors”

During an interview, when I asked Katina what materials would be most beneficial to her curriculum, she stated, “I like resources. I like being able to click or touch or have something that I didn’t sit on Pinterest and try to find and then—Pinterest is great, but it’s not a definite researched item.” Katina expresses the accessibility of platforms like Pinterest but rightfully questions the validity of the materials offered on it (Swalwell et al., 2023). As she continues to supplement her district-offered curriculum, she hopes for more resources that not only highlight a greater variety of artists but also those whose identities reflect those of her students. Similarly, when asked during an interview what would be most helpful for designing her curriculum, Cora stated,

[A] database of contemporary artists highlighting all different lifestyles, races, media, etc. We’re really trying to—we’re gonna go back in and kind of audit the artist slides we’ve started and look for windows and mirrors, ‘cause they’re doing book audits like the
classroom teachers. We want to do the same thing for our artists we share and the books we share too, but mainly the artists. And I think growing up I really don’t recall learning about—from my art teachers, any artists beyond like the cont—like the European masters and the white old people. So, I feel like I don’t have a huge knowledge of that from school, you know, so that’s all new … Once I start researching artists I get so sucked in, like for an hour just on one artist and what they’re making and I think it’s so cool. So having kind of a database with—that would be—and there’s so many out there. So I just think finding that and knowing where those resources are would be huge.

Cora discusses her desire to teach a greater diversity of artists and is in the process of auditing the artists and resources she currently uses. She is watching carefully for those artists who mirror her and her students’ identities and those who provide windows into different perspectives, cultures, and ways of life (Knight, 2006b). Knight calls for educators to critically examine these personal and professional “values, beliefs, and assumptions” and to reflect upon what they mean for teaching and student learning (p. 40). Similarly to Katina, Cora reflects on her experiences in art classes growing up and in her preservice education by stating that she was not exposed to artists beyond the old masters (Acuff, 2015). This gap in her learning has led to a desire to create a curriculum that is more equitable and decenters the perspectives of “white old artists.”

Every teacher in the study expressed the desire to teach a greater diversity of artists in their curriculums. Frida wants to move away from appropriative projects and reflects on the process of redesigning her totem lesson from Chapter Four. During an interview where she reviews the process of educating herself about the history of the Kalapuya tribe, editing her PowerPoint, and redesigning the product students would make from totems to landmarks, she said,
Yeah, I couldn’t do that for every project … And then so if I didn’t do that, one, like I’m just presenting bad material and two, it’s just like superficial work … Teaching those kids right, so that was just like 60 kids that kind of like more or less went on that journey with me, right? So even though that was a lot of effort for me, I’m like, “Okay, well, there’s 60 more people in the world that are going to maybe like, think twice.”

She acknowledged the impact of shifting her teaching to present information that focused on the vitality of the Kalapuya people. Even though she had to create all of the resources herself, Frida felt it was valuable to demonstrate to her students how she grew in critical sociocultural knowledge. During the observation, Frida explained that she used to use the Sesame Street graphic to teach students about totems, and now uses it as an example of appropriation. The process of redesigning the lesson to be more culturally sustaining was part of the process of changing her thinking and guiding her students to be more critical as they build their visual literacies. Frida stated that she would not have the time to do that for all her projects during the year. When I asked during an interview what made it so difficult, she said,

[T]he cultural piece like I just don’t want to get it wrong. And then you start trying to learn different aspects of it. And it’s just like, you could spend a lifetime right? You have to know when to stop just for one lesson. And then it’s just, it’s overwhelming. I mean, it’s hey, if you want to do it, well, I feel like it’s a lot of work. You know, when you could just friggin have them paint like a warm and cool sun. You know what I mean, haha?

Frida depicted the tension of being overwhelmed by trying to access the correct sociocultural knowledge to present to her students while knowing there are projects she could do that are much less “work.” This can be extremely tempting to do as they require less research and preparation
and are more comfortable than teaching projects that dismantle the master narrative or address current social issues. By sticking to more surface level, cookie-cutter projects, teachers can also avoid repercussions or dissatisfaction from school adults who expect artwork in the school art style (Efland, 1976; Hanawalt, 2018). As art educators grapple with a lack of culturally responsive, contemporary resources, they must navigate how to build their critical sociocultural understandings to filter poorly designed, appropriative teaching materials.

**Chapter Discussion**

As the art educators attempted to disengage the habitus of elementary art education, they encountered a multitude of barriers. The surveillance of the arts curriculum, reliance on the elements and principles, prioritization of media and techniques, and the scarcity of critical resources that dismantle the master narrative all contribute to the continued culture of art education. Whether it is conscious or not, art educators play a role in upholding this culture as they decide what and how to teach (Link, 2022b). The participants in the study grappled with these barriers as they described their curricular decisions, teaching philosophies, and goals for their future practices.

Art educators operate under the stress of proving their place in the elementary school curriculum (Hanawalt, 2018). As they determine what to teach, they are often simultaneously thinking about how their students’ work will be perceived by those outside the art classroom. With the increased surveillance of art curricula in addition to a lack of subject-based knowledge from administrators, the art educators often had to justify their choices. As Frida advocated to receive pay equivalent to other subjects in her district, she was met with scrutiny over what the elementary art educators were teaching. Stating the art educators in her district were teaching the “elements and principles” was enough for their district officials, demonstrating their power as a
reputable art curriculum. Katina too grappled with a lack of administrative support, as her evaluator did not know she had a curriculum to teach from yet was in charge of scoring her teaching practice.

Contemporary scholars in art education advocate for curricula that align with the identities and lived experiences of the students in their classrooms (Knight & Deng, 2016), yet the habitus of art education often values the art of adult experts as the best representation of achievements (Dobbs, 2004). This impacts the projects art educators teach their students as they are often teacher-led and prioritize the narratives of a select few from the master narrative (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). For example, though Frida states her desire to shape instruction based on what is “relevant” to her students’ lives, some of her most repeated projects include those such as *The Scream*, Picasso-style faces, and Aztec suns. Inherited projects such as these remain, regardless of educators’ intentions to shift because of the prevalence of the master narrative. Art educators are at times unsure of how to implement more perspectives into their curriculums as they inherit notions of who should be taught, and whose art is most valuable. Evidence of this is seen in Katina’s work to implement more Black artists into her curriculum paired with her skepticism asking, “Can I teach it?”.

As Delacruz (1996) indicated, the resources for elementary art curricula “include a preoccupation with formal design and limited aesthetic concerns, superficial treatment of artists and their works, a lack of attention to social and cultural contexts, and an absence of difficult subject matter” (p. 89). The participants worked to overcome this observation as they attempted to engage students beyond the elements and principles. Frida surpassed superficial treatment of Native art to specifically address the Kalapuya tribe whose land her school sits on. Lucy and Cora both attempted to engage their students in difficult subject matter as they showed artwork
related to the Black Lives Matter movement and the social justice issue of police brutality. Katina continued to pursue meaningful relationships as she invited her students to write poems about the ways they see themselves as their families, considering how best to represent their words within their artwork. It is important to note that in many ways the participants’ actions and interactions in their classrooms are affected by the habitus depicted in this chapter; however, they are actively and continuously working against it for the sake of their students and a more equitable art education.

The habitus of art education creates barriers for educators wanting to develop culturally sustaining teaching practices. It also diminishes the role of the students as they are often seen as empty vessels to fill, prioritizing the knowledge, preferences, and securities of adults (Freire, 1973; Greer, 1984; Leatherbury, 1967). As art educators respond to the demographic imperative (Banks, 1991a), they must consider if their curricular choices represent what is most sustaining to their students and communities, or if they instead sustain the culture of elementary art education.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

As art educators respond to the demographic imperative in their classrooms (Banks, 1991b; Fisher-Ari et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2009), they must consider the ways inherited curriculums and teaching practices work against them as they pursue culturally sustaining pedagogies. Art educators disempower students by reinforcing the Western canon, teaching projects based on Eurocentric, formalist art (Kraehe, 2010). Prioritizing the elements of art and principles of design as the standard for quality artmaking, alongside the promotion of the “old masters,” diminishes opportunities for engaging students’ voices (Efland et al., 1996). After reading literature on culturally sustaining pedagogies in subjects outside of art education as a way to dismantle master narratives, I designed this study with the following three questions:

1. How do elementary art teachers use CSP in their curriculum to promote student voice?
2. What themes, topics, artists, and strategies do elementary art teachers use to implement CSP?
3. What barriers do elementary art educators navigate as they engage in CSP?

After recruiting five elementary art educators from across the country who demonstrated an interest in designing art projects that connected with students’ interests, experiences, and lifeworlds, I conducted two interviews and an observation with each teacher. The first interview focused on the participants’ teaching contexts, curricular resources, and restrictions they faced as art educators. The second interview, an artifact-solicited interview, explored a singular project that the educators felt made genuine connections to student culture. Over Zoom, I observed a lesson with each participant to learn how their curricular goals played out in their actions in the classroom. In the following sections, I will outline the limitations of the study design, the central tensions from the data, implications for art education practitioners, and recommendations for future research.
What Did We Learn?

In Chapters Four through Six, I explored the multifaceted issues educators face as they attempt to engage culturally sustaining pedagogies. After interviewing and observing the art educator participants, I created three themes: the art educators demonstrated a range of sociocultural knowledge, they demonstrated a range of pedagogical alignment, and the habitus of art education hinders art educators’ culturally sustaining, pedagogical growth. In this section, I will summarize these findings reflecting on the contributions of each participant as a means of sharing insights into the current state of art education.

In Chapter Four, I shared excerpts from Aqua, Frida, and Lucy’s lesson observations to demonstrate the educators’ range of sociocultural knowledge. While some of the educators were able to tune into their established sociocultural knowledge to create transformative social justice lessons that were specific to their students, others struggled to develop instructional content that moved away from additive approaches to teaching art. For example, Aqua grounded her lesson on skin color with discussions about colorism. She also framed her white privilege and gaps in knowledge as she has grown over time to support students rendering their skin tones. Frida initially wanted students to create totems to represent the local Native tribes for the school art show. However, as she researched and received insight from knowledgeable cultural experts, her growth in sociocultural knowledge helped her to redesign her lesson without appropriating Native cultures.

In Lucy’s social justice printmaking lesson, I saw the tension of balancing time spent discussing the sociocultural aspects of artwork and directing students’ art products. Lucy selected a print by Justyne Fischer depicting police brutality through the murder of Tamir Rice,
yet her questioning did little to engage students in the sociocultural contextual aspects of the work. Though Lucy did not lack sociocultural knowledge of the print, she did not scaffold the discussion to help students access the meaning behind Fischer’s work. These examples of ranging sociocultural knowledge are directly connected to the tensions explored in Chapter Five in which the educators demonstrated a range in ability to achieve pedagogical alignment.

In Chapter Five, I explored the theme of pedagogical alignment as educators Aqua, Cora and Katina worked to actualize their goals of sustaining students’ culture during lessons and descriptions of yearly projects. Educators consistently shift on the continuum of teaching for social justice, anti-racism, and culturally sustaining practices. As exemplified in the vignettes of practice, educators can embody tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy with some projects and curricular decisions while also reverting to centralizing the elements and principles; outdated, stereotypical, and homogenizing lessons about culture; and the master narrative. For example, during an interview, Katina expressed a desire to “cultivate creativity” with her students. She designed a project that allowed her students to use their voices to depict their families, traditions, and personalities through poetry yet had her students model their portraits after Picasso.

Cora boldly addressed the topic of police brutality in a lesson about Adrian Brandon’s *Stolen* series yet paired it with Anjali Mehta’s art on endangered animals. During the lesson, Cora gave students little time to process what they were seeing and focused more on the visual rather than the sociocultural aspects of the works. In Aqua’s social justice printmaking project, she worked to scaffold alignment through a social action approach as she utilized the principles of cultural proficiency to help students name a community issue, brainstorm solutions, and create a slogan that advocated for their solution. From the first day of the project when students learn about contemporary printmaking duo, Dignidad Rebelde, to the last day of the project when the
prints are displayed at the fifth-grade graduation, Aqua is thinking about how to position students as art activists.

In Chapter Six, I depicted the habitus of art education to give context for why art educators are grappling with how to build sociocultural knowledge and produce lessons, content, and teaching exercises that are aligned with culturally sustaining practices. Elementary art educators face a variety of structural barriers when attempting to engage CSP. For example, Katina and Lucy cited frustration with a lack of art content knowledge from their administrators. Tensions surfaced during teaching evaluations and specific comments made about their curriculums. Frida and Lucy exemplified the strategy of using the elements of art or exposure to a variety of media to structure their yearly curriculums. This often leaves art educational content at a surface level with few opportunities for students to dig deeper into sociocultural issues.

The habitus of art education reinforces the prevalence of the master narrative because it fortifies Western, formalist priorities in art, leaving out the voices of contemporary artists. Katina and Cora pushed back against this as they practiced adding a greater diversity of artists into their curriculums. There is a scarcity of quality, critical curricular resources available to art educators, and almost every participant in the study expressed a desire for a library of resources on contemporary artists, current events, and other teaching materials that would help create a more culturally sustaining curriculum. The following section will expand on these themes from the analysis chapters to explicitly state what art educators are grappling with in their teaching practices, offering implications for how to cultivate change in elementary art education.
What Are Art Educators Grappling With?

Art educators in the study expressed a desire to teach more contemporary, diverse artists within their curriculums, while also considering how to revise lessons that rendered long-standing cultures as “from the past.” Because of the master narrative’s stronghold and its prioritization of Western artists, art educators often have less experience conceptualizing how to teach about contemporary art. In her table on multicultural approaches to teaching art education, Link (2022b) details contributions approaches in which educators design projects where students “Make replicas, imitate styles, explore novel materials and techniques” (p. 326). She also depicts transformative and social action approaches which include using art to explore various ideas and perspectives, dismantle master narratives, and advocate for change.

Frida demonstrated the contributions approach with her initial totem pole lesson. She included the project in her curriculum because she wanted to honor the local tribes for the art show featuring various geographical attributes in her area. She initially depicted the contributions and additive approaches to art education because her project required students to make replicas without addressing how white settlers violently destroyed and stole totems. After conducting research about the local Kalapuya tribe and speaking with a cultural expert, Frida saw more clearly how her previous project design was appropriative and encouraged her students’ “anthropological gaze” (Sabzalian, 2019).

Frida practiced envisioning new opportunities for how to transform the lesson in a way that addressed the complex histories of the Native tribes in her area while also encouraging students to reflect on their relationships with the land. Though important work, Frida addressed in an interview the time-consuming nature of these revisions stating, “I couldn’t do that for every
If advocates of CSP implore educators to make transformations in the content they teach, how can they better support educators in accessing content on how to teach transformative and social action approaches to multiculturalism in art education?

**Deep Discussions**

Another common tension that the art educators grappled with in the study was how to engage students in discussions that provide sociocultural context to the art they look at and create. The current pattern in elementary art education demonstrates utilizing teacher-directed projects where the content of the final art project is determined before students begin learning, requiring little input from students (Hanawalt, 2018). Engaging students in discussions about the ideas, perspectives, and experiences of artists is one of the best ways to prepare them for creating thoughtful and informed work of their own. Again, the practice of developing questions and guiding students through sociocultural discussions that challenge widely accepted cultural norms is not taught in pre-service art teacher education making it difficult for educators to implement into their teaching (Delacruz, 1996). I noticed patterns in the data when educators tried to guide students through more complex sociocultural content of artwork.

For example, in Cora’s lesson on Adrian Brandon and Anjali Mehta, she asked questions that were focused more on the visual components of the artworks as opposed to sociocultural content on police brutality, racism, and animal endangerment. Although often universal for looking at any artwork, questions like, “What does your eye see?”, “What does your mind see?”, and “What do you notice?” fail to strategically call students’ attention to the perspectives, themes, and topics necessary for exploring a piece of art. There was a quickening of pace when students did not respond quickly to open-ended, thought-provoking questions. When Frida asked
her students during the landmark lesson, “Do you think this project would be considered cultural appropriation?” and when Lucy asked students when referring to Brandon’s Stolen series, “Why do you think I am showing you this?” resulting in students responding with silence or distraction, they moved on without providing follow up questions. There were opportunities to further engage students on these concepts, taking time to draw out their prior knowledge, opinions, and personal experiences that would have added invaluable content to the lesson and perhaps even the students’ artwork. How can art educators think about their questioning and discussion exercises as equally important to the artwork students produce?

As art educators grapple with how to develop more intentional scaffolded questioning, they must also address how to build a greater critical sociocultural knowledge about artists, their students, and themselves (See Figure 4). As evidenced by the art educators in this study, it is important to address the reality that many educators are already pressed for time as they develop curriculums, create teaching resources, teach their students, manage the art room and student work, and display art throughout the school. This leaves little time to devote to critical reflection, personal learning for professional growth, and the redesigning of new, critically oriented, narrative-disrupting art projects. Yet through the insights shared by the educators in the study, it is impossible to practice CSP without an effective understanding of the sociocultural factors at play in the field of education.

Although I included hook’s (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy as part of my conceptual framework, I found that the gaps in my participants’ sociocultural understandings limited their abilities to embody the nuances of engaged pedagogy. hook’s theory emphasizes students and teachers coming together with a shared responsibility for learning and self-actualization. Although I was only able to observe a fraction of the art educators’ work with their students,
rarely were students placed in positions to lead learning opportunities or control what was happening in the art room. Additionally, engaged pedagogy focuses on teaching for students’ spiritual and intellectual growth, utilizing their identities as the means to examine topics like race, gender, dis/ability, and class. Though the educators’ lessons engaged student responses to artworks or required students to create art that was personally meaningful, it was rare for student identities and lived experiences to drive the lessons. hook’s focus on students’ spiritual growth and wholeness is not just for the sake of connection, but to transgress the boundaries of difference in the classroom to co-create as social agents of change (Maniglia, 2022). This goal of change and social transformation was lost when participants’ guided discussions with their students remained at surface level. More research is needed to understand how engaged pedagogy is embodied in the elementary art room; however, I urge art educators to continue hook’s call to forge new structures of power in the classroom, leverage student knowledge and experiences for designing projects, and position learning as an act of resistance to structural oppression.

**Critical Reflexivity**

Kraehe et al. (2015) state that educators “need to understand how sociocultural factors influence the production of subjectivities, curriculum spaces, and art worlds. It is this sociocultural understanding that enables arts educators to approach their daily decision-making and teaching practices with critical perceptivity and reflexivity” (p. 2). For example, Aqua’s time spent reflecting on her identity as a white woman and how it affects her position of power in the classroom has helped shape her teaching practices. She addresses sociocultural concepts of the artists through extended time for discussion, she forefronts the knowledge of “women of color”
and “queer artists” to dismantle the master narrative, and she prioritizes the lived experiences of her students, helping them to become advocates for social change through their art. While reflecting during an interview, Cora grappled with how she handled unexpected comments from her students and how the racial identities of herself and her students were at play. Her constant reflection on her teaching interactions and the content of her students’ art mirrors the work that must be done to embody CSP. Taking the time to assess critical sociocultural knowledge will help educators navigate potential flashpoints in the classroom and decide what resources to use in their curriculums (Hood & Travis, 2023).

**A Scarcity of Curricular Resources**

Another difficulty the art educators in the study grappled with was a lack of access to critically oriented teaching resources and the time-consuming nature of making them on their own. Repeatedly, art educators asked for databases or resource libraries that would allow them greater accessibility to a diversity of artists without having to search online for long periods of time. The most commonly available art education resources reify white artists from the Western canon and uphold the status quo (Buffington & Bryant, 2019; Chin, 2016). Acuff (2014a) states, “There is a disconnect between scholarship and information on the websites that provide practicing and prospective art teachers with resources and lesson plans” (p. 307). As educators are attempting to develop more critically oriented teaching resources, they are often hindered by the homogenizing and appropriative lesson plans offered online. During an interview, when asked what curricular materials would be necessary to develop a more culturally sustaining teaching practice, Cora stated that a “database … highlighting all different lifestyles, races, media, etc.” would help make sure the artists she teaches provide windows and mirrors to the
identities of her students. Similarly, Frida addressed the “overwhelming” nature of trying to teach in a way that addresses the sociocultural concepts within artists’ lives and their work and the ever-present possibility of “get[ting] it wrong” when delivering such information to her students. If art educators want to respond to the call to teach a greater diversity of artists with contextual nuance but struggle to gain access to such information, what can be done to support them in filtering the resources online so that they are using best practices when addressing multicultural content?

**Relationships with Administrators**

Lastly, art educators grappled with their relationships with administrators and supervisors around topics such as teaching performance and curricular oversight. None of the educators in the study cited having access to administrators or supervisors who truly helped them improve their teaching practices. Both Lucy and Katina cited frustration with the lack of art-based knowledge administrators had and the way it individually affected components of their jobs such as teaching evaluations and curricular decisions. Frida experienced this same lack of arts-based knowledge from her district officials as they required uniformity in the elementary art educators’ curriculums across the district without fully understanding what it would look like. Hanawalt (2018) concluded when working with new in-service art teachers that “the authority of some administrators was so strong that they did not even need to be physically present for the teachers to feel they were constantly being watched, and thus, the teachers were adjusting their practices accordingly” (p. 97). This simultaneously unsupportive yet overbearing nature makes it difficult for art educators to build successful relationships with their administrators. In the section below, I will expand on the difficulties art educators are grappling with to imagine what it will take to
not only help art educators develop a more culturally sustaining teaching practice but to also determine what it looks like to provide students with a more equitable and sustainable art education.

Limitations

There are four key limitations I would like to address in my research study. First, when I originally designed the study, I had little formal instruction and hands-on experience with CSP which impacted my theoretical framework, my research questions, my recruitment methods, and my data collection. My goal was to recruit teachers who practiced CSP; however, it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which each educator understood and embodied the pedagogy before inviting them to participate in the study. Initially, my focus was to explore what the educators were doing “right” instead of considering how I might handle moments where they failed to execute the central tenets of CSP. Through the analysis, I worked to describe these tensions depicting not only the educators’ curricular choices but also how difficult it can be to develop a culturally sustaining teaching practice in elementary art education as little research exists on CSP in this setting.

Second, this study was limited to the experiences and perspectives of five elementary art educators. Though the participants have several decades of combined experience, have taught in a variety of school settings, and currently teach in areas around the country, they cannot represent all elementary art educators. In the study, I focused on the main themes found across the participants’ experiences while also trying to tell their individual stories. My goal was not to generalize these findings, but rather add in-service educators’ voices to the literature on CSP in art education. The third limitation is that all interviews and observations conducted for this study
took place over Zoom. While making it convenient and accessible to study participants and their teaching methods from across the country, Zoom can also act as a barrier to fully understanding instructional contexts. There were times when it was difficult to hear students’ responses, and because students were often positioned out of frame or facing away from the computer, I may have missed information such as facial expressions, intonations, and other nonverbal cues. Because I observed each teacher once, the data shared in the study only provides a small snapshot of each educator’s year.

Lastly, the data for the study was collected from March through June. This is the end of the school year for the participants, and factors such as state testing, art show preparation and execution, and the chaotic nature of end-of-the-year elementary school festivities hindered the data collection schedule. Two of my teaching observations occurred in the last few weeks of the school year, and I was unable to complete an observation for one educator due to three separate unexpected events that caused her students not to come to her classroom. Although some of these timeline circumstances were unideal, I am so grateful that these educators agreed to participate and allow me to observe their classes during a stressful time of year.

**What Will It Take to Give Students a Culturally Sustaining Art Education?**

If art educators must often rely on themselves to do their jobs, how can we operate under the expectation that they will know how to develop a culturally sustaining practice by developing a nuanced critical sociocultural understanding and how to engage students in dialogue beyond the surface about difficult topics? If art educators do not have administrators who know about art education, let alone support the teaching of critical perspectives in education, then how will they create the space to do so? If art educators are offered almost no curricular resources, let alone
those that address the sociocultural aspects of artists and their work or support the facilitation of rich discussions as artmaking, how will they ever move on from mimicry projects from the master narrative and appropriative facsimiles of non-Western art? If art educators have no one to first, recognize and second, point out the pedagogical mismatches, how will they ever change them? Considering these questions, art educators and their supervisors must contemplate what it will take to give students a culturally sustaining art education.

**Implications for In-Service Art Educators**

Though the habitus of art education often limits educators in their ability to make changes to their teaching pedagogies, art teachers are the most impactful resource in their students’ art education. Despite some oversight of their curricular decisions, most elementary art educators have a strong influence over the projects they select for their curricula. To consider how to provide students with a culturally sustaining art education, I offer the following implications for practice at the in-service level.

**Dismantling the Master Narrative**

Art educators must acknowledge the way the elements and principles, the master cannon, and deceased, European white artists are often still the foundation of elementary art curricula (Efland et al., 1996; Greer, 1984; Link, 2019). Dewhurst (2019) stated that the field of art education “is dominated by specific white cultural values” (p. 149). Therefore, educators must consider the dominant culture because it will undoubtedly influence their attempts to dismantle narratives that uphold and reinforce it (Wasson et al., 1990). As Cora demonstrated in Chapter Six, taking inventory of how many projects are teacher-led, how many require students’ critical
thinking and dialogue, and how many center artists of color may serve as a starting point for where changes need to occur. Taking time to design projects that are transformative and social action-based will allow educators to help students understand sociocultural contexts more deeply, utilize art for change, challenge stereotypes, and consider a variety of perspectives in artmaking (Link, 2022b). This shift moves away from a teacher-led, discipline-based approach to art education that has been practiced for decades (Dobbs, 2004; Kader, 2005) and forwards the roles of students as co-creators and leaders in the classroom. As art educators see a shift in the priorities of their curricula, they may notice the need to develop new projects based on critical questioning, exploratory themes, student voice, and creativity.

**Strengthening Students’ Sociocultural Knowledge**

In art education today, there is a concentration on students’ art production, rather than their thoughts and insights on art content (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). Art educators must practice the art of creating intentional, impactful, scaffolded questions to help elementary students digest complex, sociocultural knowledge. To do this, art educators should cultivate art rooms as places for exploratory conversations that help students process new information, question the status quo, listen and understand one another, and make meaningful work. Specifically, art educators can guide their students to examine various artists’ viewpoints on a particular topic, they can present cultures as dynamic and heterogeneous (Chin, 2016), and they can scaffold discussions about various forms of injustice, positioning students as advocates for change. Treating student dialogue as necessary as art content knowledge positions students’ voices, ideas, and imaginations as critical components of the curriculum (Ballengee-Morris & Taylor, 2005; Overby et al., 2022).
As art educators create spaces for more discussion and questioning, they must also demonstrate flexibility to change gears when students make unexpected comments or ask certain questions (Brown, 2013; Overby, 2022). There is no way to be prepared for every possible scenario, but the position art teachers inhabit as they pursue intentional, scaffolded, critical dialogue with their students sets a tone that either encourages students to share or shuts them down. Like Albers (1999) suggests, as art educators acknowledge, that “difficult” artworks will arise, [they] can begin to openly discuss such issues that involve gender, race, and homosexuality and, with time and thoughtful engagements and questioning, we can forward art as a powerful way to instigate changes in students’ beliefs about themselves and others (p. 11)

Discussing and creating art offers opportunities to explore students’ perspectives and guide them toward new understandings. Although this can bring up tension, art educators can meet their students where they are and build new foundations for discussing social issues. As educators embody humility and vulnerability by sharing that they do not have all of the answers, it will model for students how to learn, unlearn, and respond to injustice and oppression (Willcox, 2017).

**Building Supportive, Critical Art Teacher Communities**

As art educators take inventory of their curricula and attempt to make changes, they cannot go through the process alone. As indicated by the educators in the study, the insight of others is needed to reflect on lessons, projects, and teaching practices thoughtfully and critically. Art education can be an isolating field and finding people who share similar teaching philosophies can provide abundant support. Online platforms and social media groups are easily
accessible and offer a variety of connections for art teachers. Creating spaces in person with other local art educators is an extremely powerful tool to work through difficult pedagogical issues, especially for educators in the same district. Although united in purpose, finding other art educators who can provide different perspectives racially, culturally, and socioeconomically will allow even greater exploration of blindspots and insight into curricular choices. Making spaces where voices can be listened to and responded to with care and compassionate relatability may be the key to sharing the mission of developing a culturally sustaining teaching practice.

**Practicing Critical Reflexivity**

Lastly, to create culturally sustaining art curricula, art educators must expand their understanding of sociocultural factors, concepts, and the individual sociocultural contexts of their communities and classrooms and their effect on the teaching process (Acuff, 2014b; Kraehe et al., 2015). There are a multitude of ways educators may do this. Reading books, journals, and articles that offer instruction on culturally sustaining practices is a great place to start. Oftentimes with all the demands that are placed on educators, and art educators specifically, this can feel like the opposite of what needs to be done. However, art educators must grow in their critical sociocultural humanizing knowledge and critical reflexivity if they are to shift curricular decisions to help repair the current state of art education (Brown, 2013, 2020). One way art educators can expand their sociocultural understandings is to respond to questions that prompt reflection on identity, bias, privilege, and difference (Knight, 2006b). For example, contextual and situational questions for reflection might include:

- Where do I teach? What is the history of my town/school/city?
● What are my town/school/city’s demographics? In what ways has/does racial segregation affected/affect my town/school/city?

● What social issues affect the lives of my students and their families and in what ways? How are people in my community talking about current events? What community resources are available for making connections in the classroom?

Regarding their identities, art educators may ask themselves:

● How does my racial identity affect interactions in my classroom?

● In what ways does my identity reflect my students’ identities and in what ways does it not?

● How do my race, gender, and SES affect the ways I interact with my students and the bias I may enact? How am I working to counteract the effects of my biases in my teaching and interactions with students?

Lastly, questions about curricular decision-making may include:

● What are the racial/gender/ability/identities of the artists I teach in my curricula? How do those identities connect (or not connect) to those of my students?

● Do the artists I teach make work about issues that are relevant to my students?

● Are the artists/cultures I teach constructive for questioning the status quo, promoting social action, and inviting the students to speak up about their passions, desires, hurts, etc.?

These prompts offer opportunities for art educators to call attention to the unnamed factors at play in the field of education. Creating a more in-depth sociocultural knowledge base will help educators put culturally sustaining pedagogy into action.
Implications for Administrators and District Officials

Although elementary art educators often have some level of freedom when making curricular decisions, their jobs are still largely impacted by the influences of administrators and district personnel. The educators in the study cited frustration with administrators’ lack of knowledge dealing with their content areas. The art educators in the study often put up with this lack of knowledge until it affected them more directly, such as during a teaching evaluation or when district officials tried to regulate their art teachers’ curriculums with vague requirements (Hanawalt, 2018). To utilize their authority effectively, administrators must consider what they can do to help art educators gain access to the resources needed to embody CSP.

Because administrators often have little to no formal art education training, they must formulate partnerships with trained arts professionals such as pre-service art educators, museum educators, local arts liaisons, or community art leaders to help provide insight into the field of art education. These partnerships can lead to increased understanding and awareness of contemporary literature published in art education, specifically about critical multicultural practices. As art educators have limited access to relevant professional development opportunities and quality teaching resources, administrators and supervisors can advocate on behalf of their art teachers for funding to attend conferences and subscribe to research-based teaching resources. Administrators and district officials may also consider assisting educators in developing and sustaining arts education support groups or communities of practice for accountability, collaboration, and care. By taking their employees’ concerns and desires for professional growth seriously, administrators can shift current understandings of art education towards those that are informed by theory, critical practices, and their art educators’ aspirations.
**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study suggests that although art educators have a desire to modify their curricula to be more sustaining to students’ cultures, there is still a disconnect between that desire and what is happening in their classrooms. If the most knowledgeable about CSP are theorists and university professors, more research needs to be done looking into how to filter that knowledge to in-service educators. In other words, if contemporary, critically oriented research suggests different teaching methods than are commonly practiced in K–12 classrooms, then how do we build a stronger connection between those who write theory and those who are active practitioners? Research shows that even if art educators attend an institution that forwards student-centered and culturally relevant teaching practices, art educators are still largely unable to continue a critical practice when they start teaching in their school environments (Hanawalt, 2018). Future research could explore how to sustain connections to universities once art teachers enter the field. Additionally, action-research studies that encourage critically-minded art teacher networks may offer insights on how to build support outside of school settings for mentorship, critical dialogue, and art education resource generation. Lastly, as many of the participants in the study stated a desire for more contemporary and relevant teaching resources, continued research on how school districts or district arts liaisons design or gain access to curricular resources may offer new insights on how to provide art educators with materials that support a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

As art educators continue the difficult, rewarding, impassioned, and at times all-consuming work of teaching youth they must not surrender to the external forces that threaten to perpetuate art education as it is known today. Instead, like hooks (1994), they must believe that
[t]he classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In the field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

To envision art education as a space for freedom opens up immense opportunities to dream into existence new ways of learning and artmaking that engage and sustain the lives of students. How can we as art educators creatively take up this call and move beyond boundaries to design and sustain art education for change?


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Yin, R., K. (2012). Applications of case study research. SAGE.


https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>46–50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>B.F.A in Art Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>46–50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in Interior Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>41–45</td>
<td>15+</td>
<td>B.F.A. in Photography, MAT in Art Education, currently pursuing an Ed.D in Curriculum and Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqua</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30–35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>B.S. in Anthropology, MAT in Art Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30–35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>B.A. in Studio Art and Education with Teaching Certificate for Art Education K-12 &amp; General Education Grades 1-6, M.A. in Art Education</td>
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Table 2: Participant School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Grades Taught</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th># of art teachers at school</th>
<th>District Mandated Curriculum Y/N</th>
<th>Student Demographics From 2022-2023 School Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>57% white, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 9% Multi-Racial, 1% African American, 1% American Indian, and less than 1% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Toddler (2)–6</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>58% White, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 13% Multi-Racial, 10% Black/African American, &lt;1% American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>96% Black/African American, 2% Multi-Racial, &lt;1% White, Asian, and American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqua</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>PK–6</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>96% Black/African American, 2% Multi-Racial, &lt;1% White, Asian, and American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>K–6</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>64% White, 16% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 8% Multi-Racial, 2% African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Data Collection Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Data Collection Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>3/14/23</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>5/4/23</td>
<td>55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>4/7/23</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>4/2/23</td>
<td>70 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>5/30/23</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>4/26/23</td>
<td>55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>4/3/23</td>
<td>90 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>5/24/23</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqua</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>4/24/23</td>
<td>65 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqua</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>5/10/23</td>
<td>55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aqua</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>5/4/23</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>5/31/23</td>
<td>65 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>6/9/23</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>6/12/23</td>
<td>70 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contributions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Additive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transformative</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Enhancing students’ knowledge and skills by exploring other cultures</td>
<td>-Appreciate other cultures</td>
<td>-Understand your own/other cultures and perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Giving students entertainment and fun art experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Explore universal themes across cultures (without challenging dominant perspectives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Explore universal themes across cultures (decentering dominant perspective by exploring other interpretations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection of Art/Artists</strong></td>
<td>-Artists of color are often craft/folk artists or from antiquity</td>
<td>-Thematic units/lessons that could be taught with all white artists now feature art by artists of color (i.e., lesson exploring the theme of “Journeys” featuring Aaron Douglas and Jacob Lawrence among others)</td>
<td>-Perspectives of various cultures and artists infused into thematic lessons throughout the curriculum to decenter dominant perspectives/ “common knowledge” (i.e., lesson on “Journeys” that questions issues of historical migration through perspectives of artists from various cultures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Artists of color are rarely named</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Artists of color who are named are mainstream or iconic (i.e., Jacob Lawrence or Frida Kahlo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizing Structure</strong></td>
<td>-Multicultural lessons are mostly taught during ethnic holidays (Black history month or Dia De Los Muertos)</td>
<td>-Multicultural artists are sprinkled throughout many product/skill-based art lessons over the year</td>
<td>-Multicultural artists and their work are the driving force behind inquiry-based art lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretation of Art/Artists</strong></td>
<td>-Emphasis on novel materials or special skills as important to recreate their art</td>
<td>-Emphasis on theme or elements/principles as important to view their art</td>
<td>-Emphasis on artist’s identity/perspective as important to understanding their art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Art interpretation is teacher-centered, brief, and often confined to the lesson introduction on day 1</td>
<td>-Many cultures may be studied simultaneously on an aesthetic/surface level</td>
<td>-Deep discussions and art interpretations are driven by student ideas, highlight multiple perspectives and continue throughout the unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Teacher guides brief and structured discussions about interpretations often confined to day 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context of Art/Artists</strong></td>
<td>-Focus on entertaining or fun facts</td>
<td>-Brief biography is provided with facts</td>
<td>-Artists may tell their own stories through</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Creative Projects** | **-**Brief information may be shared on an artists’ achievements without detailing barriers or struggles they faced.  
**-**Often reinforces cultural stereotypes.  
**-**Make replicas, imitate styles, explore novel materials and techniques (i.e., Mexican sugar skulls or African Masks).  
-**Look at multicultural art, then explore the same Elements/Principles or themes in own art (i.e., Family paintings inspired by Carmen Garza or color collages inspired by Romare Bearden).  
-**Make artwork to investigate perspectives, ideas, and reflect on self (i.e., Analyze stereotypes in popular children’s book illustrations and devise a collaborative animation that retells the story from a different perspective).  
-**Make art that questions, disrupts, or comments on social issues to effect change (i.e., Work with indigenous community artists to understand the history of the land and concerns of native people, collaborate on community mural to raise awareness). | **about process and skills, may reinforce stereotypes**  
**-**Vague references to culture/social issues may be included but does not cause students to question the status quo. | **quotes or videos**  
**-**Context on artist’s identity and worldview are central and prompt students to reflect on their own perspective and question stereotypes. | **the community**  
**-**Context on artist’s identity and activism are central and lead students to ask how they can make social change to challenge stereotypes and systems. |

Note. From *Examining whiteness in elementary art education* by B. Link, 2022, Dissertation, pp. 325–326. Copyright 2022 by B. Link.
Figure 2: Ester Hernandez, Sun Raid

Figure 3: Where I’m From Poem Template (Katina)

Where I’m From

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(a specific item from your childhood home)

from _________________________________________________________________________

(two products or objects from your past)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(a phrase describing your childhood home)

and _________________________________________________________________________

(more description of your childhood home)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(a plant, tree or natural item from your past)

whose _______________________________________________________________________

(personify that natural item)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(two objects from your past)

from _________________________________________________________________________

(a family name)

and _________________________________________________________________________

(another family name)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(a family trait or tendency)

and _________________________________________________________________________

(another family trait or tendency)

and from _____________________________________________________________________

(another family trait, habit or tendency)

from _________________________________________________________________________

(another family trait, habit or tendency)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(a religious phrase or memory)

I am from _____________________________________________________________________

(an ancestor)

and _________________________________________________________________________

(another ancestor)

from _________________________________________________________________________

(two foods from your family history)

from _________________________________________________________________________

(a specific event in the life of an ancestor)

and from _____________________________________________________________________

(another detail from the life of an ancestor)
Figure 3 Continued: Where I’m From Poem Template (Katina)

___________________________________________________________(a memory or object you had as a child)
I am from those moments__________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________ (conclude by finishing this thought or by repeating a line or idea from earlier in the poem)

Freeology.com- Free School Stuff
Figure 4: What is Sociocultural Knowledge?

Sociocultural Factors
- race, gender, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, religion, culture, ethnicity

Sociocultural Concepts/Themes
- color evasiveness, racism, deficit thinking, racial superiority, whiteness, white privilege, meritocracy, homophobia

Sociocultural Contexts
- individual, site specific, and contextual information regarding:
  - Self
  - School/Students
  - Place

Sociocultural contexts are the enactment of sociocultural concepts at play within self, school/students, and place

Note. This diagram is based on the work of Milner (2010), Brown (2012), Brown and Kraehe, (2010), and Love (2019).
Appendix A

Solicitation Website

Hi, I'm Addy White.

I am a 4th grade art teacher at an elementary school in Charlotte, NC. I taught 3rd through 5th grade, and I love the little kids. Learning from their imagination, goofiness, and willingness to take on a challenge helps me be a better art teacher and human.

I am a doctoral candidate working towards my EdD in Instruction and Curriculum Leadership (ICL) at the University of Memphis. Though I do not anticipate leaving the classroom anytime soon, I wanted to pursue this degree to have my craft and better meet the needs of my students.

Looking for Educators Who...

• Are currently teaching in an elementary art classroom.
• Have at least three years of elementary art teaching experience.
• Feel passionate about designing curriculum and instruction that centers students’ experiences, interests, and communities.

Contact Me

Thank you so much for taking time to read about my work! I truly hope you consider participating. If you are interested, please reach out to me at my email below so we can set up a time to chat. I am happy to answer any additional questions you may have.

Looking forward to connecting and learning more about your teaching practice!

EMAIL

n affid8888@gmail.com
Appendix B

Recruitment and Participation Intake Form

_ Briefly, what is the educator’s teaching context?

_ How do they define their teaching pedagogy? What really matters to them about teaching and student learning?

_ What do they sound most passionate about?

_ How does the educator talk about their students?

_ What matters to them in their curriculum?

_ Other information

Do they mention:

- critical consciousness, bias, awareness
- student-centered, student choice, student agency
- relationships, partnerships, school community, teacher community
- power, racism, dominant narratives, stereotypes
- culture
Appendix C

Interview Guide 1- Semi-structured Interview

Date/Time:
Location:
Pseudonym:

1. Do you have any specific criteria for your curriculum, either personal or state-mandated?

2. What are some of the main resources you use when planning your curriculum?
   - Do you use feedback from your students to make curricular decisions? If so, how?
   
   3. If you could have any resource or curriculum available to you, what three things would you ask for? For each choice explain why.

4. How does your knowledge of your students impact the way you make curricular decisions?

5. How do you create opportunities for students to share their culture through their artwork?
   - In what ways do you create opportunities for students to share their voice in the classroom and through their art?

6. How do you select the artists that you share with your students?
   - Who are some of the artists whose work you share with your students? Why?

7. What instructional strategies do you frequently use for presenting content to your students?

8. Are there any projects that you repeat year after year that your students enjoy?
   - Why do students enjoy it? What is it about the project that makes it a keeper?

9. What barriers do you run into when trying to actualize culturally sustaining pedagogy in your curriculum?

10. How do you manage personal bias when planning your curriculum?

11. Do the opinions of administrators and students’ parents play a role in your curricular decision-making? If so, how?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your curriculum planning experiences as an art teacher?
Appendix D

Interview 2- Unstructured Artifact Solicited Interview

Date: 
Time: 
Location: 
Pseudonym: 
**This is an artifact-based, unstructured interview guide. Teachers will share a physical or photographic example of a finished art project**

Criteria of Project Exemplar: 
-the project is designed with the goal of making genuine connections to student culture 
-must have taught the project more than once 
-if the exemplar is teacher-made, you must also provide photographs of at least two student exemplars 
- additional documents such as PowerPoints and lesson plans are beneficial but not required

Walk me through this project from start to finish.

- Has this project evolved since the first time you taught it? If so, how? Why?
- In relation to the project, how do you provide opportunities for student voice?
Appendix E
IRB Approval

IRB #: PRO-FY2023-185
Title: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Elementary Art Education
Creation Date: 11-17-2022
End Date: 
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Adeline White
Review Board: University of Memphis
Sponsor: 

Date: 2-24-2023

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<th>Key Study Contacts</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Member</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Member</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Copyright Approval for Ester Hernandez’s *Sun Raid*

Hi Addy,

Thanks for emailing us and congratulations on your forthcoming dissertation!

We are pleased that you would like to include an image of our Ester Hernandez artwork in your dissertation. You may use the image file that we have posted online. This permission is for your dissertation only. Any other later publications where you may have interest including this artwork may have more structured and formal procedures.

Please use the following citation which indicates the artwork, credits our collection, and notes copyright to the artist.


Happy New Year!

Riche Sorensen  
Rights & Reproductions Coordinator  
Smithsonian American Art Museum