

## PEDAGOGY

# Cultural Competence of Urban Middle School Physical Education Teachers

Sara B. Flory and Rebecca A. Wylie

## Abstract

*Much literature cites how cultural clashes among teachers and students can undermine educational processes and cause feelings of mistrust among students in school settings. This research examined the cultural competence of secondary PE teachers who taught in diverse urban schools. The research questions guiding the study were (1) what do urban teachers know about students and the community they serve? (2) what instances of cultural distance exist between teachers and students in these schools? and (3) how do teachers bridge cultural distance between themselves and their students? Using qualitative research methods, we examined the cultural competence of six purposively sampled PE teachers in an urban school district over one school year. Participants were recruited based on recommendations from the PE supervisor in a large metropolitan school district in the Southeastern United States. Data collection included multiple interviews ( $n = 36$ ), teaching observations and field notes ( $n = 18$ ), and teaching workshops ( $n = 4$ ).*

With the inception of schools in the United States, students who did not encompass a traditional “White Christian” culture have faced numerous obstacles to gain the opportunity for quality and equal education. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,

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Sara B. Flory is an associate professor of Physical Education, College of Education, University of South Florida. Rebecca A. Wylie is a doctoral student, College of Education, University of South Florida. Please send author correspondence to [sbflory@usf.edu](mailto:sbflory@usf.edu)

the days of “separate but equal” were no more. The desegregation of schools led to teachers who as a majority were White women facing for the first time a diverse classroom.

The issue of how best to teach students from diverse cultures is still pertinent in teacher education preparation programs and within schools. According to recent national statistics, about 80% of the teaching force is White and 77% of teachers are women (Loewus, 2017). Despite the differences in race, gender, and religion, the responsibility of every teacher remains the same: providing every student the opportunity to learn (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

Ladson-Billings (1995) created a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) framework with the aim to address “pervasive gaps in the educational experiences” (Allen, Hancock, Starker-Glass, & Lewis, 2017) of minority students. Teachers who embody CRP understand their students come from various cultures and thus teachers understand the value of allowing students to share their culture and of assisting students with making sense of the world around them (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Most U.S. teachers come from middle-class backgrounds and attended schools grounded in cultural “normalcy.” These teachers are likely to encounter students who are ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically different than themselves, especially if they teach in urban communities. Therefore, it seems likely that teachers may encounter students who are culturally different, or will experience a cultural disconnect once they complete their teacher education program (Harrison, Carson & Burden, 2010; McCaughtry, Barnard, Martin, Shen, & Kulinna, 2006). Research on the cultural competency of teachers in urban schools is warranted.

This research examined the cultural competence of secondary PE teachers who taught in diverse urban schools. The research questions guiding the study were (1) what do urban teachers know about students and the community they serve? (2) what instances of cultural distance exist between teachers and students in these schools? and (3) how do teachers bridge cultural distance between themselves and their students?

The cultural clash among teachers and students can undermine educational processes (Chen, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Differences in teacher and student values may cause feelings of mistrust among students (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Many urban

PE teachers shared that students are often disinterested, resistant, and disruptive (Chen, 1998, 1999; Ennis, 1995; Ennis & McCauley, 2002). If teacher values or content selection does not align with students' cultural viewpoints, students are likely to disengage altogether (Ennis, 1995). McCaughtry et al. (2006) reported that urban PE teachers struggle with providing culturally relevant PE activities; therefore, urban PE teachers may inadvertently create environments in which urban youth are disinterested in PE and miss important opportunities for physical activity because students may not find meaning or value in the activities their teachers choose. Being a culturally competent PE teacher is a dynamic process that changes depending on the teacher, school, and population being served. The theory framing this research, Flory and McCaughtry's (2011) culturally relevant physical education (CRPE) includes three steps for providing culturally relevant instruction.

Many frameworks explain the role of culture in education (i.e., cultural discontinuity, cultural responsiveness, etc.; Banks, 1993; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These frameworks cannot operate without sophisticated knowledge of the public served. The first step of CRPE is to connect with students and provide culturally relevant schooling. To do this, teachers must deeply know students, including ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; learning styles; challenges; and personal information providing greater insight into students' out-of-school circumstances.

The second step of CRPE involves identifying cultural distance—discrepancies between worldviews and values—between teachers' personal biographies and the realities of their students. Vast cultural distance often exists between schools, teachers' biographies, students, and families in urban communities. Pransky and Bailey (2002) wrote, "Because all communities do not think, believe, or learn in identical ways, there may still be much . . . that is confusing to or misunderstood by children with language, culture and socioeconomic differences" (p. 371).

The third step of CRPE involves overcoming cultural distance by devising strategies that bridge cultural distance (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Several studies have identified successful teachers who understand historical, political, and economic factors affecting communities and view

students as family (Gay, 2010). Cochran-Smith (1995) suggested teachers “explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own, and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways” (p. 495). This framework offers a solid foundation for developing urban PE teachers’ cultural competence, which can help improve teacher preparation programs and help teachers engage students from diverse backgrounds.

## **Method**

We used qualitative research methods to examine the cultural competence of six PE teachers in an urban school district over one school year. Participants attended multiple workshops, were observed in their schools, and participated in multiple interviews to provide insights into their cultural competence. In this section, we outline details regarding the participants, data collection methods, and analysis.

### **Participants**

Participants were six purposively sampled PE teachers in an urban school district. Participants were recruited based on recommendations from the PE supervisor in a large metropolitan school district in the Southeastern United States. The district is one of the top 10 largest districts in the United States. The school district encompasses over 250 schools, including 45 middle schools serving students in sixth through eighth grade. In this district, middle schools have between two and six PE teachers.

Four males and two females with two to 12 years of teaching experience participated in the project. Table 1 outlines the demographic information of the teacher participants. Beyond the recommendation of the district PE supervisor, teachers were selected based on the differing demographic makeup of the school population and the ethnicity of the teacher. Alfonso was selected to participate because the school where he taught had recently undergone a demographic shift of an increase in students from non-Hispanic populations.

**Table 1**  
*Participants*

<b>Teacher name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>School name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>School population</b>
Alfonso	33	4	Hispanic	Powell	78% Hispanic 15% other ethnicities
Brian	38	7	White	Whitaker	27% Asian 28% African American 16% Hispanic
David	41	12	African American	Powell	78% Hispanic 15% other ethnicities
Jason	27	4	White	Grove Park	60% African American 21% Hispanic
Kate	31	5	White	Martindale	50% African American 24% Hispanic
Rebecca	24	2	White	Valley Cove	57% African American 30% Hispanic

## Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three distinct phases: pre-workshops, workshops, and post-workshops. Qualitative data collection included interviews, teaching observations, and workshops. This section discusses each element of data collection.

**Interviews.** Each teacher participated in multiple interviews throughout the project. All interviews followed an interview guide, were audio-recorded, and were transcribed. First, the teachers participated in an entrance interview ( $n = 6$ ) during the pre-workshop phase of the project, which allowed us to build rapport with the participants and learn about the teachers' backgrounds in relation to their teacher preparation program, their teaching experiences at their school, and their teaching philosophies. These interviews lasted approximately 60 min.

Once the workshop phase began, we conducted two to three additional individual interviews with each teacher ( $n = 20$ , approximately 45 min each) related to the topics covered in workshops and observations of their lessons (discussed in Teaching Observations section). Teachers also participated in focus group interviews at the conclusion of each workshop ( $n = 4$ , 45–60 min each). Exit interviews ( $n = 6$ ) occurred at the post-workshop phase of the project, allowing teachers to reflect on the project, discuss changes to their teaching practices or philosophy, and provide feedback about their participation. The exit interviews lasted between 75 and 90 min each. Overall, we conducted 36 interviews throughout the project.

All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher, who has over 10 years of qualitative research experience conducting interviews and using probing questions. Entrance interviews followed the same interview guide with probing questions to learn about the participants' educational backgrounds, teaching experience, experiences at their school, and their overall teaching philosophy. The focus group interviews were also based on an interview guide with probing questions. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to review concepts covered in the workshop, to allow the participants to discuss their experiences together, and to gain additional perspectives about the teachers' interactions with their students. Sample questions from a focus group interview following a workshop including an activity regarding the definition of culture were

“Has your definition of culture changed since the beginning of this project?” “What are some ways that you learn about your students’ culture?” and “What might you change about your teaching after this workshop?” These questions allowed all of the participants to share teaching strategies or classroom routines and provided a space for the teachers to learn from one another. Individual interviews with teachers started with an interview guide based on concepts from the most recent workshop, as well as questions related to events from observations or questions related to their teaching strategies.

**Teaching observations.** We observed each teacher throughout the school year three times ( $n = 18$ ) for at least two class periods each occasion to identify practices and interactions that bridged the cultural distance between teachers and students. Each observation lasted approximately 2 hr. The classes observed consisted of 30 to 40 middle school (sixth to eighth grade) students, which is the typical class size in the district. Observations were scheduled at the convenience of the participating teacher and the lead researcher. We took detailed field notes during each observation to note things like the strategies teachers used in classes and teachers’ reactions to student behaviors. Field notes were handwritten during the observation and transcribed the same day. Observations were scheduled at the convenience of the teachers so that the researcher could observe one or two class sessions and conduct an interview (either during a prep period, a lunch period, or after school). Usually, observations occurred prior to interviews with the participating teachers and the researchers often discussed notable events from class observations during the interviews.

**Workshops.** Throughout the project, teachers participated in four workshops to explore components of cultural competence. For example, during a workshop related to knowing the public served, teachers participated in a Community Exploration activity to examine the demographics of students and families within their school’s zoned boundaries, organizations within the area (i.e., Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, faith-based organizations, well-known local businesses, etc.) that may influence students’ participation in physical activity, and other noteworthy information regarding the community. Each workshop concluded with a focus group interview, which allowed the participants to share their viewpoints with one another.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed via constant comparison and inductive analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Field notes and interviews were transcribed within a day of the data collection session. Constant comparison allowed the researcher to identify relationships among the data and start to develop themes. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded each week so that interpretations of the data could be compared and the significance of the data could be determined in subsequent data collection sessions. Excerpts with similar codes were grouped together and helped us to write future interview guides.

Prolonged engagement, triangulation, and formal and informal member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) helped establish trustworthiness of the data. During data collection, we conducted informal member checks to ensure that interpretations were accurate. Specifically, the individual and focus group interviews during the workshop phase of the project, as well as the exit interview during the post-workshop phase of the project, allowed ample opportunities for member-checking questions and data triangulation.

## **Findings**

Data from teacher observations, interviews, journal responses, and survey results describe the changes in teachers' cultural competence as a result of participating in this research. Specifically, these results outline the nuances of teachers' knowledge regarding their students and their students' home communities and the influence of this knowledge on their teaching practices. The findings also highlight common instances of cultural distance between the teachers and their students, including how teachers learned to identify cultural distances between their own cultural templates and their students' lived experiences. Third, the findings identify the unique strategies these teachers use to bridge cultural distances encountered with their students and the influence of these strategies on students' engagement in PE.

For the purposes of this paper, the findings focus on the central theme of respect. Respect, although not clearly defined by our participants, was shown collectively through their desire to devise strategies that bridge cultural distances, to spend time connecting

with students, and to be consistent in their expectations of all students. By demonstrating this respect for their students, the teachers shared they could engage their students more in PE classes and they felt more effective. This section outlines the influence of demonstrating respect for students on each step of the cultural relevance cycle.

### **Respect and Knowledge of Students**

It was apparent from the first observations of the teachers in this project that they all approached their students with a demeanor of mutual respect and had established a rapport with students that other teachers within their physical education departments or across the school did not have. None of the teachers took on an authoritarian approach in their classes. We asked the teachers about their respectful approaches to their students, and they shared that the respect they showed was purposeful, planned, and often resulted in learning more about the students and their lives outside of school. Brian understood that students in the current generation view education much differently than he may have as a middle school student, so he had to adjust his approach. He said,

... things are a lot different in schools now compared to when I was in middle school. I guess that's not a bad thing, but I know the students aren't going to listen to me just because I'm the adult. You have to give some respect if you want to get any respect.

Kate shared,

I had to figure out a way to get through to the students—I tried the dictator approach for a while, and that really backfired, especially when they didn't know me or what I was all about as a teacher. So I tried to do something that was more compatible with what I thought they needed—I had to become compatible with my students.

Alfonso discussed how he approached students in his classes, especially those who transferred in the middle of a school year. He said,

I try to demonstrate respect right away when I get a new student. I introduce myself formally to the student—I'll

shake their hand, look them in the eye, get their name, and ask them to pronounce it a few times if I'm unsure myself. I really try to show them they are a valued member of my class. I think that helps remind the rest of my students that I respect them, too.

To maintain the rapport and respect they had established, several teachers planned into their lessons activities that allowed them to circulate among students and have individual conversations. Rebecca spent the first five minutes of her Monday classes asking students to share a positive event that happened over the weekend, which she felt helped develop a community-like atmosphere. Jason implemented "Fitness Fridays," where students participated in their choice of activities designed to elevate their heart rates. He used this time to visit with groups of students and talk to them about how things were going in their other classes, what weekend plans they might have, or local sports teams.

All six teachers shared that they observed obvious differences in the way students interacted with them and other teachers at their school because of the respect they showed students. Jason had a reputation for being respectful of his students, which benefited him in his own classes, but outside of his classes as well. He shared, "I definitely have better rapport with my students than some of the other teachers. Even if I'm covering another teacher's class, the students get their work done and I can get them back on task quickly." Kate shared that her administration assigned her a "homeroom" section, which was unusual for the PE department teachers. She said, "None of the other PE teachers have a homeroom. But I have 14 boys who should probably be in the ninth grade by now. They work hard for me because they know I'm not going to judge them."

By purposely demonstrating respect to students in their classes, the teachers learned more about their students and their lives outside of school. David shared that once students knew that he respected them, it was like a "switch" that made his students open up to him. He said, "When they're comfortable, when they know you respect them, and you're not going to tell them to sit down and shut up, they do more for you. They'll share things that allow you to have more authentic interactions with them." Several teachers claimed that students would share things about their home lives, their families,

their extracurricular activities (e.g., sports teams or youth groups), or their hobbies. Rebecca shared, “. . . we start with these small nuggets of information, and then the students are more willing to open up about their lives or backgrounds.” Brian said, “It makes it easier to connect and develop some common threads with them.” He continued,

...it doesn't seem that difficult to [show students respect], but it makes my job so much easier when I do it. Teachers that complain the most about their students are the ones willing to do the least. Maybe it's crazy that I view my students as actual human beings, as whole students, not just burdens in my gym. But when you delve into it, I'm here for them; I want to help make them great citizens. There's much more to my students than what I see for the 50 minutes they are in my gym.

The connections the teachers built with students by demonstrating respect and developing rapport with students provided a nearly endless supply of cultural knowledge that benefited several facets of teaching. As David alluded, this “flip of a switch” that occurred once mutual respect was established meant that teachers could understand their students at a deeper level and help them succeed. For example, Alfonso rarely had management issues with several students labeled as “problem students” elsewhere in the school. Alfonso shared a particular anecdote about a student who told him that his father was in jail, his brother had dropped out of school, and his mother was doing her best to make ends meet for the rest of the family, which was causing a stressful environment at home. A math teacher reached out to all of the student's teachers because she was struggling to get him to cooperate in class or turn in assignments on time. Alfonso was surprised at the e-mail, as he had never had any issues with the student. Based on their mutual respect for each other, he was able to talk to the student privately about the issues in math class and encouraged him to change his behavior; he also offered suggestions to the math teacher to help keep the student motivated and engaged. Similarly, Kate shared that she often had students stop by her gym on the way to the main office if another teacher sent them out of class. She said,

I probably get at least one kid a week [who] comes to me before they go to the Student Affairs office if they get a referral [from another teacher]. We usually talk about what happened so they can calm down before they go see the assistant principal, and we talk about ways they can avoid getting in trouble again with that teacher. They know I'm not going to excuse their behavior, but they know I'm going to keep it real with them and listen. I guess I'm sort of an ally for them.

Brian brilliantly summed up the benefits of having cultural knowledge of students because of the respect he demonstrates toward students. He said,

Once that connection is made, students can talk to me, and I can adjust my expectations. If you're having a terrible day because of what's going on at home, I'll do my best to make sure your day doesn't get worse. I still have high expectations for all of my students, but my job isn't to prepare professional athletes—my job is to prepare healthy human beings.

Overall, the teachers participating in this project seemed to understand that giving students respect first was key to connecting with students and providing engaging lessons. As Kate simply stated, "Honestly, just treat them like they're my own."

### **Respect for Students and Identifying Cultural Distance**

The teachers in this study were very aware of the cultural distances between themselves and their students, but their respect for their students encouraged them to investigate more of the cultural distances between them. All of the teachers admitted being very aware of the socioeconomic differences between themselves and their students. At four of the five participating schools, over 88% of the students attending qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Many of the teachers knew of at least one to two homeless families within the school population and reported that single-parent families or extended families raising children was the "norm" for their students. The teachers also shared the more "obvious" cultural distances between themselves and their students. Brian identified that students at his school practiced a variety of religions, noting students

would discuss the various holidays they celebrated and he would occasionally receive requests to excuse students from PE during times of fasting. Alfonso taught in his classes a few Muslim girls who followed more conservative dress practices. These obvious cultural distances did not change the respectful way the teachers interacted with the students, and during interviews, several teachers identified ways that they attempted to connect even more because of the cultural distance. Referring to his Muslim students, Alfonso shared that the cultural distances frequently sparked conversations. He said,

It's actually pretty cool—I try to ask questions and learn what I can about the students. I'm Catholic, and I'm pretty clueless about my Muslim students. I know there is a space here at the school where they can go pray. So I've asked them how often they pray during the day, and have them explain some of the holidays to me. I think they appreciate that I ask questions rather than assume or just ignore that part of their culture.

Kate learned about Three Kings Day, a holiday celebrated in early January in some Hispanic cultures, only after she conversed with some of her students. She said, "A few students seemed 'down' when we returned to school in January. They were a little jealous of the students showing off Christmas presents, but their families hadn't celebrated yet."

Following a workshop focused on understanding culture, the teachers shared their desire to move beyond the simplistic "heroes and holidays" approach to culture. During the workshop, teachers participated in activities and group discussions that helped them identify their own cultural backgrounds. Teachers were asked to identify significant world events that occurred during their school-age years; to consider their own worldviews of concepts such as time, personal space, or relationships with non-family members; to list their various identities (e.g., teacher, husband, son, father, etc.); and to consider their possible assumptions and biases. During this workshop, the teachers also considered the "iceberg model" of culture, where the observable behaviors and practices of one's culture are considered the "tip of the iceberg," or the surface culture, while the deeper elements of one's culture are considered below the surface. These deeper elements include various notions including concepts of

authority, personal space, social interaction rates, time, gender roles, as well as other core values that determine what an individual may interpret as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, or acceptable or unacceptable.

After participating in the workshop discussions and activities, several teachers expressed an increased awareness for these cultural distances. Jason said, “I know that I can’t ignore the cultural differences, but now I’m aware of things that I never even considered. I’m really going to pay attention to body language and the space I give my students.” Rebecca shared, “Examining my own feelings about these things [deeper cultural elements] will make me think about how I approach my students. I’ll probably think twice before I just react to something a student does.” Kate continued, “Maybe the way I prefer to interact with one of my students is really different than what they would prefer. I can’t just assume that the way I do things is what is best for that kid.”

Teachers also participated in an activity in which they explored zoning maps of their schools. Several teachers had some knowledge of the neighborhoods where their students lived, but were asked to analyze the zoning maps in terms of housing, access to fresh foods versus fast food or convenience stores, health care, green spaces, and public transportation. Respect emerged as the teachers identified the cultural distances between their own experiences and how their students navigate their daily lives. Kate said,

Most [students] are bussed in from the east side of town, because the neighborhood school is a magnet program that you have to apply for. They’re on a bus for 90 minutes each way every day. That makes for a pretty long day . . . I hear about so many fights at the school bus stops. A lot of families don’t have cars, so I don’t see that many parents or caregivers on conference night. And even if they do have a car, if I were in that situation, I’m not sure I would spend the gas money to come all the way here, either. Some of my kids will just use their bus pass to take the city bus home if they decide they’ve had enough at school, because they know all of the routes. I sort of understand the attendance issues we have at this school because of transportation.

David recognized that his students had few options for fresh food, which might influence their performance in PE. He reflected,

... the corner store is the major source of food for my students. I hear them talk about it, too. They know where to buy single cigarettes, where the cashier doesn't ask for I.D., and where to trade food stamps for cash. Sure, there are a few grocery stores, but a bag of chips is cheaper than a head of lettuce, and soda is cheaper than water, so decisions are made. Are they fueling their bodies for physical activity? Probably not optimally. So it makes sense to me that some of my students get tired after jogging for 20 seconds.

Rebecca shared that encouraging students to be active outside of school might not be a feasible strategy for some of her students. She said,

I noticed that there's not many parks in the immediate area for my students to go and play in after school, and I've seen homeless people in the one that's just down the road. So I can't just suggest that [my students] play basketball or go for a walk without being concerned about how safe that really is . . .

Jason shared that the school zone analysis helped him understand how much different his middle school experiences were than his students'. He said,

I've driven around in the area, and students will tell me about the "bad" parts. If you think about it, some of the circumstances that my students have to deal with, they're already young adults. A lot of them take care of themselves, which wasn't the case for me at all. They can get into so much trouble in the city, especially because of the economic level. Some kids really don't care about participating or what grade they get in PE, because they're just trying to get through another week . . . and I guess I can't be mad at them for that.

## Respect for Students and Strategies for Bridging Cultural Distance

The participating teachers continued to demonstrate respect for their students in the strategies they devised to bridge the cultural distances. Some of these strategies were conscious efforts related to classroom management, policies, or individual interactions. Other strategies the teachers used followed a broader philosophy and allowed students to thrive in PE classes and beyond.

A few of the teachers discussed letting students sit out from participation without any consequence for their daily grade. These teachers knew when a student's mental or emotional state meant that participating in a highly structured activity might not be best. Brian said,

I can tell when a student is having a rough day, usually within the first few minutes of class. If that's the case, I usually try to get them aside to talk to them and find out what's going on. If there's something major affecting them, I might let them participate at a lower level, or sit out and observe, or if they need to go talk to the resource officer, that's OK too. If I look at the big picture, I need to consider the needs of that student overall, not just their physical activity. It's not the end of the world if that student doesn't play team handball that day, you know?

Jason admitted to being more lenient with some of his classroom management practices, such as having cell phones out during class or moving out of the groups he put them in for activities. He said, "I'd waste instructional time if I nagged students about everything. I give them chances to correct their behavior, and they usually get it together, but again, I'm sure it's because I respect them." Rebecca altered her dress out policy so that families did not experience an additional financial burden. She said, "I sort of gave up on requiring a uniform for PE, because I know some families can't afford that. So as long as they wear dark athletic shorts and a lighter colored shirt, I'm fine with it." Alfonso purposely avoided large-group instruction in his courses so that his students did not act out in front of their peers. He knew that many of his students wanted opportunities for

attention, because they may not get much individual attention outside of school. He shared,

My students want to shine in front of their friends, so they'll try to embarrass others or do something to get the spotlight when we're in large groups. I get them going into activities in smaller groups and then I'll make my way around to give refinements and other instruction. I don't even give them the chance to do it, and it solves two issues. They get that special attention from me that they're craving, and my classes run smoother.

Kate shared that she “started over” with one class of students who were struggling to participate without arguing or fighting. This class was made up of students who had been “held back” at least one grade and who struggled with reading and writing. After struggling with the whole group for several weeks, she allowed the students to play small-sided games of basketball or football (which the students enjoyed playing) and called students over individually and spent one-on-one time with them. She said,

It was a month of conversations. I asked what I could do to help them, what class do you hate the most, what class do you like the most. The students in that class needed to know they had at least one teacher looking out for them. I took notes and tried to look at the group as a whole when I was done. We treat the class as a study hall one time a week and I help them with their work from other classes. They've come so far—they were able to play a game of Ultimate Frisbee the other day with actual teams, and that was a huge step.

Some of the teachers' respect for their students guided their philosophy for teaching and all of the strategies they used in classes. For example, Brian felt that it was unrealistic for his students to blindly conform to his teaching style, and he frequently asked for student input throughout the school year. He shared, “I can't expect my students to adapt to my teaching—I need to adapt to where they're coming from. I want them to be stakeholders in their own education and success—so how do I make my teaching better for them?”

David knew that his lessons might look less structured to an outside observer, but his commitment to and respect for his students was a top priority. He said,

We have a unique opportunity in PE to connect with kids because it's so social. I try to be as authentic with students as I can, and show them the respect I know they are craving. I treat students like they are my own kids, because I believe what you give is going to come back to you at some point. My lessons might not look like they're 'supposed to' according to the district, and maybe I'll never get that merit bonus that's based on test scores. But I invest in my students. I take time to connect with my students every day. I make my kids believe that they are capable of more than what surrounds them. I've worked with a student over the past year [who] believed it was 'in his blood' to be a criminal because every male in his immediate family was in jail. I can't just write them off, I need to understand who they really are.

Regardless of the strategies that the teachers used to bridge the cultural distances between themselves and their students, the teachers' actions stemmed from respect. Usually, these strategies were aimed at helping develop the student as a whole, rather than developing only their health or fitness or boosting a formal teaching evaluation score. After one interview, Kate reached out via text message. She wrote,

The things I do (or try to do) for my kids are never fully conscious. My goal is to get the kids on a path to being a good person. Helping them think through thoughts before actions. To me, they don't have a value or a test score. They're a person who needs guidance or a tangible "Jiminy Cricket" in a world where adults are too busy or fed up with the ridiculous fads that kids go through. I try to do what I think is best for each kid, so even if they're driving me crazy, I always come back to "Are they kids? Are they workable? Of course they are. Let's do this."

## Discussion

Teachers in urban schools encounter many issues not faced by teachers in more suburban areas. Diversity in their classes comes in the form of not only student race and ethnicity but also socioeconomic levels, languages spoken, and parental involvement. Creating an environment of not only respect but also trust may be more difficult in these diverse settings. One way teachers can establish respect with students stems from building an environment centered on cultural competence.

Research on teacher–student relationships highlights the influence of interactions on students’ social, emotional, and academic experiences (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011; Wilkins, 2014), as well as of these relationships on the school climate (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Often, student academic achievement is linked to emotional responses to teacher behavior (Phelan, Davison, & Cao, 1992; Wilkins, 2014). Specific to urban schools, Ennis and McCauley (2002) identified that students who are at risk and do not have trusting and respectful relationships with teachers may experience consequences such as failing grades, detention, and school suspension. For these students, reciprocating trust and respect may be especially difficult because of the “shields of distrust and anger developed over years of school failure and perceptions of unfair treatment” (Ennis & McCauley, 2002, p. 155).

Much of the research related to cultural relevance in physical education focuses on teacher preparation for cultural competence (Domangue & Carson, 2008) and on designing or implementing culturally relevant curriculum (Ennis, 1999; Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006). This study was unique because the participants were purposefully selected by the researchers after being identified as “highly effective” in urban schools by a district administrator and after attempting to identify and understand the components of their teaching practice that allow them to be more successful than their peers.

The connection between respect and cultural competence is incredibly strong, as one of the main tenets of establishing cultural competence is respecting cultural differences and viewpoints, rather

than expecting individuals to conform to the dominant culture's views and norms (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The findings of this study differ from the findings of other research regarding teachers' respect in urban schools, teacher–student relationships in urban schools, and cultural relevance in PE, because the respect the teachers in this study had for their students motivated the teachers to reach students who were reportedly disengaged elsewhere in school. The six participants in this study worked hard to understand the specific cultural backgrounds and the communities their students lived in to create stronger connections in the classroom. The teachers identified that close, personal, respectful relationships with their students translated into more opportunities for student learning, better classroom management, and higher efficacy for teaching.

The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the relative inexperience of several participants. We realize that a larger sample of teachers may have yielded more insights to the ways that teachers understood the populations they taught, identified cultural distance, and implemented strategies to overcome cultural distance. The lessons learned from these teachers, however, can inform future practice in challenging school environments for improving PE experiences for all students. Future research could investigate how specific professional development aimed for improving cultural competence improves teaching practices in diverse schools, as well as explore physical education teacher education practices that encourage culturally relevant teaching upon completion.

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