CPAR Final Findings: Studies 3 and 7

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Original Research Questions

Study 3

RQ1: To what extent, and in what ways, do CRLS 9th grade students who are enrolled in the ELA/History Seminar classes talk about the ways that teachers make them feel comfortable and capable in school?

RQ2: How, if at all, do the perspectives of these students differ from ninth graders who are not in the ELA/History seminar classes?

Study 7

RQ1: How do CRLS 11th grade students and teachers talk about positive student-teacher relationships within the classroom?

RQ2: How do CRLS 11th grade students and teachers talk about factors that contribute to and/or detract from positive student-teacher-relationships?

RQ3: And are there differences in the way that 11th grade students and teachers talk about positive student-teacher relationships across lines of race, gender, socioeconomic status, program of student (College Prep, Honors, AP, ELL, OSS) and/or other social identity factors?

Data Collection Process

Researchers organized and met with with 9th and 11th grade students in focus groups. Teachers conducted four 9th grade focus groups with approximately ten students per focus group. Three focus groups with a total of 4-6 students were asked a number of questions related to what helps them feel comfortable, connected, and capable in their classrooms.

9th grade students who participated in the focus groups were students enrolled in three of the school's seminar classes. Seminar is a small class designed for students with significant academic needs around reading and writing. Students were asked twelve questions, each trying to determine the importance of a variety of factors in helping them feel a sense of belonging and a sense of being capable in the classroom.

11th grade students who participated in the focus groups were asked two general questions -- "What does a positive student-teacher relationship look and feel like?" and, "What does a negative student-teacher relationship look and feel like?" Students all filled out a survey asking them a number of questions related to those themes. The students participating in the focus groups were predominantly students of color. Researchers looked through the focus group responses and ultimately organized the data into five statements, which reflected the major themes from the students' statements. These five statements were then posed to 9th grade students in their non-tracked history classes in the form of a survey. Students were asked to rank

how important each factor was in making them feel like they belonged and were capable in the classroom. The students who took the survey reflected the broader student demographics at CRLS. The survey statements included:

1. I connect with the teacher's personality or some aspect of the teacher's personal identity.
2. The teacher tries to connect with me on a personal level.
3. The teacher believes in me, pushes me, and encourages me to be the best student I can be.
4. The teacher puts effort into creating a classroom environment that engages all types of learners.
5. The teacher works to make the curriculum relevant, important, or interesting to students.

Lastly, in addition to the focus groups and surveys with students, six teachers from different disciplines and academic levels (CP, HN, and AP) were interviewed about what contributes to and how to cultivate positive teacher-student relationships.Teachers of predominantly 11th graders were interviewed and asked questions about: (1) what positive and negative student-teacher relationships looked like in the classroom, (2) how, if at all, the teacher incorporated relationship building into the curriculum, and (3) any differences they see in student-teacher relationships across the different levels they taught - CP, HN and AP.

Data Results

We went into the study knowing the value and importance of student-teacher connections and relationships. What we hoped to uncover and elucidate were:

1) a clearer picture of major themes that emerged from students about what makes for a positive classroom experience;

2) whether different themes emerged between students across different markers -- race, SES, or academic designation; and,

3) whether teachers talked about positive teacher-student relationships differently depending on the student groups they worked with.

The data that emerged from the student focus groups and the student surveys were not terribly surprising, in that students overwhelmingly indicated that the most important factor for feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom was connecting with the teacher's personality or some aspect of the teacher's personal identity. This was true across racial (Appendix A) and SES (Appendix B) subgroups of students.

The teacher interviews generated several important themes. All teachers agreed that building relationships with students was an important piece of their ability to teach students successfully. **Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that relationship building was more important in CP level classes.** Teachers at the Honors and AP levels reported that students already had some type of relationship outside of class mostly with family who could converse and engage with the curriculum due to their own previous experiences with schooling.

(Example: Family members who read the same books or were experts in the field could help student further and deepen engagement with the school work). As a result they reported this cohort of students often did not go out of their way to build relationships with teachers in the class not were they dependent on these relationships for success in the class. It was harder in AP/Honors class to develop stronger relationships because kids seemed more grade driven than interested in forming relationship; teachers interpreted their students as maintaining a "polite distance." In CP classes, teachers felt that the outside relationships either with family or mentors were not as strong or did not exist so it was more valuable and important to develop in-school relationships. One powerful narrative that we heard from teachers was the notion that students coming from families whose parents were college educated were able to engage with their parents in academic conversations, whereas students without college-educated parents could not converse and dialog about their academics in the same way. Some teachers reported that students' abilities to perform in AP/HN courses was not as dependent on the quality of the student-teacher relationship but more of a skills issue; whereas, these same teachers suggested that in CP courses, students' abilities to perform were often not only a skill issue but more an attitude/buy-in issue. Quality relationships thus became more important to develop in CP classes, so that students would trust the teacher and would be more likely to open up about obstacles to their learning. The incorporation of explicit community building strategies and explicit efforts to nurture quality student-teacher relationships varied across discipline and teacher style. Some teachers embedded this as part of their curriculum and class structure. Some teachers did not use any class time away from their academic curriculum to develop and strengthen relationships but rather used outside time to do so or connected with adults who knew students to help make these connections.

Areas for Improvement

If we were to conduct the 9th grade focus groups again, we would decrease the number of questions because we found that students were confused about the phrasing, as they believed many of the questions were asking the same thing. Additionally, we would consider adding a demographic question to the survey that asks 9th grade students to include whether they are enrolled in a seminar class. This would help us to more clearly explore whether the survey question responses showed any significant differences between students in seminar classes and those not enrolled in seminar classes. If we were we to conduct the 11th grade focus groups again, we would reduce the number of questions asked in the survey given to students and film the student focus group discussions, as they were extremely powerful and yet difficult to fully capture through notes alone.

Survey Themes and Corresponding Student Quotes

Below are the five themes we identified from examining the focus group data and a sample of corresponding student quotes to give voice to these themes.

Theme 1: I connect with the teacher's personality or some aspect of the teacher's personal identity.	● For me (I'm a mixed female with a black mom and a white dad) whenever I see a female educator of color (which I don't find often) I feel very capable of my work. I almost look at them as role models. I told myself, she went through the same things as you and look at her now. ● It wasn't because of what he looked like but simply his personality. He was always super bubbly and brought a great energy to the classroom. He would tell a joke (a terrible corny joke) to break the ice. He constantly checked up on every one of us to make sure everything was good outside of school, and if it wasn't he would assist us in any way possible. ● Color matters -- a white lady teaches differently than a person of color would -- white kids get the joke, other kids don't. ● Teachers who are younger understand better what students are going through. ● PERSON OF COLOR - we have so few in the CPSD!!! Also first-gen students, or just someone who does not come from a middle/upper-class background!
Theme 2: The teacher tries to connect with me on a personal level.	● They [teachers] don't just see you as your student they see you as more than that. ● They listen to the students, make the students want to care, and offer help when asked for it ● The teacher will communicate with me one on one and they will make an effort to get to really know me instead of grading "just another assignment". ● Feels like your being noticed ● It feels like you have someone on your team that is ready to support you when you feel like you are falling. ● Incredible - if they recognize that each student is different, and has different needs, they are already doing better than most of the teachers I've had. ● It feels good; it feels like I am understood, and wanted in a class.
Theme 3: The teacher believes in me, pushes me, and encourages me to be the best student I can be.	● They told me that I got this and basically just had faith in me throughout the whole semester. ● They expect more of you and only the best. ● It gives students the drive to do better than they can already do at that point. Even if it puts some pressure on them, it helps them feel as though they are better than they believe they are because it was told to them by someone else, and that someone else being an older(and wiser) individual with (some) power

	gives the students confidence. ● Always made me feel confident and never tore me down… ● It feels like someone believes that you can do great things and not everyone has parents or an adult that says these things.
Theme 4: The teacher puts effort into creating a classroom environment that engages all types of learners.	● They treat all kids the same and all with equal respect. ● If there isn't diversity, then I sometimes feel not capable. ● It looks like a teacher that loves their job, how a class is set up and organized can represent that. ● It looks completely natural in the way that they communicate to their students, who don't feel like they are being talked down to, but rather are being brought together to intellectually share ideas. ● I will feel included and I will look forward to joining the community ● It feels like you are really connecting with everyone in the classroom and you have gotten to know them on a different level because you know what they think about a certain topic that they would've been silent for if the teacher hadn't encouraged them to talk.
Theme 5: The teacher works to make the curriculum relevant, important, or interesting to students.	● Connects to life now… ● Increased interest = increased sense of engagement ● For me, I feel that history matters most because of its impact on us -- keeps me motivated to learn. ● They have posters of things that some students enjoy, so they could enjoy the same thing ● They implement activities like Four Corners; make intentional groups, not just randomize names, to allow for a diversity of opinions and backgrounds; TALK TO STUDENTS OF COLOR AS MUCH AS STUDENTS WHO ARE WHITE (many of my teachers only talk to students of color if they are being punished or quieted, yet have no trouble joking around with white students for 10 minutes, despite a student of color trying to talk to them) ● It feels like a teacher is trying to make the most of their class time, making sure that they themselves and the student enjoy it.

Final Conclusions

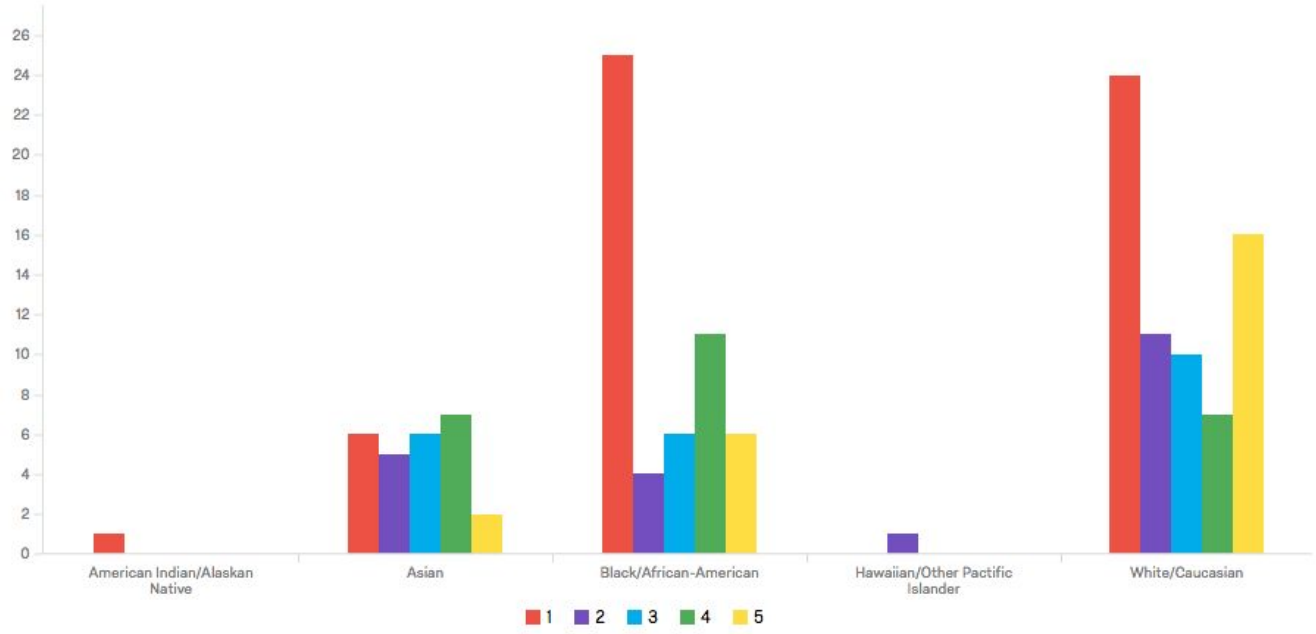
All students value personal connections with teachers; this was evident from the data we collected and examined. But perhaps what was most significant from the focus group conversations with both students and teachers was that **quality student-teacher relationships seem to be most critical for students of color, students who may be first generation college**

students, and students from lower SES backgrounds in order for them to most successfully engage with course curricula at higher levels. Assumptions that relationship building in AP and Honors classes were not as critical may in fact hurt or discourage underrepresented and underserved populations of students who are enrolled in these classes; these assumptions may also contribute to a reluctance for students to take these classes. It is incumbent upon teachers to carefully consider their students' concerns regarding what helps them to feel comfortable and capable in a classroom in order to more equitably and intentionally engage all learners.

Possible Next Steps

With the data from the focus groups and surveys, a future team of teachers and students could create a brochure or flyer for students and teachers with helpful tips for how to cultivate and maintain positive student-teacher relationships that take into account the five major themes that emerged from the data. It would help to clarify and promote the need to develop these relationships across level of class - CP, HN and AP.

Appendix A: By Race



Where 1= I connect with the teacher's personality or some aspect of the teacher's personal identity.

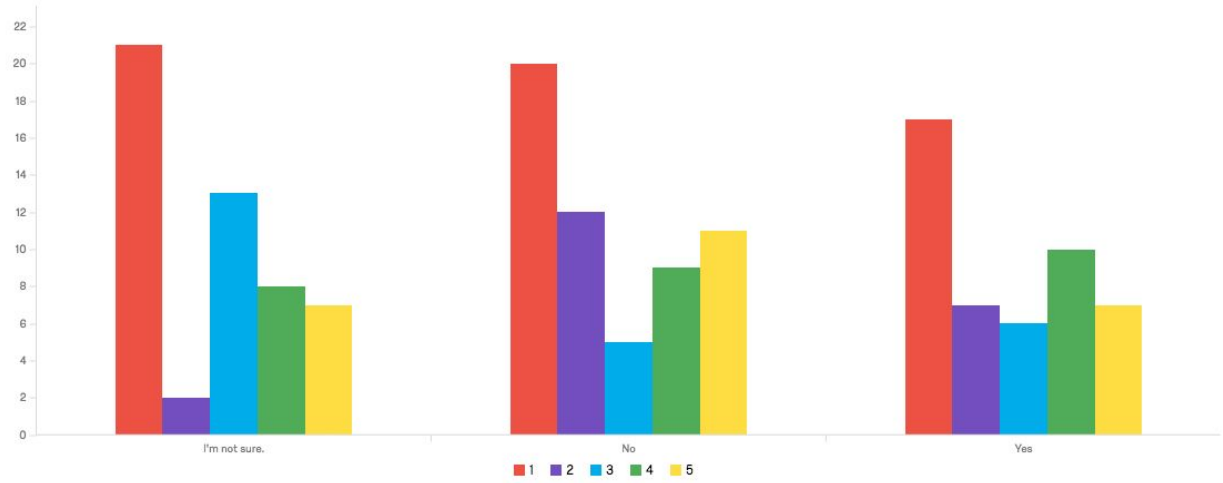
2=The teacher tries to connect with me on a personal level.

3=The teacher believes in me, pushes me, and encourages me to be the best student I can be.

4=The teacher puts effort into creating a classroom environment that engages all types of learners.

5=The teacher works to make the curriculum relevant, important, or interesting to students.

Appendix B: By Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch



Where 1= I connect with the teacher's personality or some aspect of the teacher's personal identity.

2=The teacher tries to connect with me on a personal level.

3=The teacher believes in me, pushes me, and encourages me to be the best student I can be.

4=The teacher puts effort into creating a classroom environment that engages all types of learners.

5=The teacher works to make the curriculum relevant, important, or interesting to students.