HIGHLIGHTING TEACHER VOICES: DISCUSSIONS ON RACE AND RACISM IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Emily Noelle and Daniel Rhys. This degree belongs to them.

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First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank my children, Emily and Daniel. They have been my biggest supporters and cheerleaders throughout this process. Daniel checking in, “did you get good work done?” and Emily expressing that some day she wants to write a book just like her mom. This intense work took a lot out of me, but their unwavering belief in me is what propels me forward. Emily and Daniel are the heart and soul of everything I do- and I cannot express enough gratitude for all the love, patience, and understanding they have shown.

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ABSTRACT

Throughout my career in education, I have observed that teachers are challenged by engaging in discussions involving race and racism. This study sought to further understand teachers' feelings about discussing race and racism in the elementary classroom by answering the research question: How do elementary teachers experience race and racism in their schools and classrooms?

This qualitative, critical narrative inquiry dissertation focused on three participant interviews with public-school elementary teachers in Tennessee. The data generated from these interviews informed narratives which were then analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Analysis was followed by In Vivo and structural coding (Saladana, 2015) to identify five themes from the narratives: trust/ distrust in teachers, the value of children's lived experiences, the importance of cultural insiders, allowing students to think critically, and providing professional development. Trustworthiness was determined from analytical memos, member checking, and peer reviews/debriefing.

The discussion and implications are presented in Chapter Six and compared and contrasted with relevant literature from Chapter Two. Recommendations are given for researchers and practitioners in education at the end of this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a child who grew up in the 1980s, I have experienced the evolution of education from the shifting perspective(s) of a white female student, educator, and clinical supervisor of pre-service teachers (PSTs) for nearly forty years. One particular educational issue that has continued to resonate with me is teachers' perceived attitudes toward discussions about race and racism in schools. This issue has presented itself in several ways throughout my educational career and has galvanized my deeper investigation of this topic.

Critical Conversations

As an elementary student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I vividly remember how I learned about Christopher Columbus: a highly regarded "hero" who "discovered" America. I remember discussing Native Americans and their interactions with Columbus, but nothing that would suggest Columbus as anything other than heroic. Absent from my education of this particular historical figure were multiple perspectives; there was only one story. While distinctly remembering my learning, I cannot recall my unlearning—my growing awareness of the atrocities that followed Columbus's destructive path. This story is just one example of the whitewashed history, the lies we tell ourselves (Zinn, 2014) from my childhood. These histories, which show up in classrooms across our nation, have lasting consequences—not just for individuals, but for entire groups of people, systems, and society.

Throughout my 15 years of elementary teaching, I often had to confront these histories and determine how to teach them to my students. Questions I have grappled with include: Should I discuss the evolution of slavery when reading a biography about Harriet Tubman? Should I talk about the injustices rooted in United States slavery that still exist today? Should I focus on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech or go in-depth about the totality of his activism? As a student, I often thought about the inaccuracies I was taught and how those lies shaped my thinking about race and racism.

Since I retained such vivid memories of my own schooling, I drew upon those experiences to make an intentional effort not to present a Eurocentric and monolithic story to the students in my classroom. For example, when teaching a unit on the mission system that played an integral part in California's history, I wanted my fourth graders to understand that the European explorers' dominant narrative should not be the focal point. While creating missions out of sugar cubes is a standard fourth-grade project across California, it came to my attention that completing only that requirement would essentially be the equivalent of re-creating plantations in Southern states. Instead, we spent considerable time understanding the Native American tribes' perspectives and how the California mission system affected them, nearly destroying their way of life. This specific example made me question the implications for individuals, groups, systems, and society if children are only taught from a superficial, whitewashed perspective.

My grappling with issues of whitewashing did not disappear when I left the classroom. Throughout my time supervising Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs), issues of race and racism would continually arise during coursework and practicum experiences. For

example, I was approached by one PST who was conducting a small group discussion on the Civil War when the topic of the Confederate flag arose. Unsure of how to handle this in the context of her classroom community, knowing Black[1] students most likely already have an awareness of the problematic symbol, while some white students may view the flag positively, she felt helpless. Believing she was making a decision that would result in minimal harm, she quickly changed the topic to avoid any discussion. As her supervisor, I offered alternatives to silence, such as opening up the debate about the Confederate flag's history and implications and why it is an oppressive symbol. Although I know of the challenges associated with such topics from my own experiences in the classroom and engagement with research (Bolgatz, 2005; Copenhaver, 2000; hooks 1994; Kello, 2016; Philpott et al., 2011; VanSledright, 2002), I was struck, yet again, at how many teachers are not comfortable, knowledgeable, and willing to engage in discussions about race and racism with their students.

Considering my varied educational roles over the past several decades, I know my experiences grappling with race and racism in teaching are not specific to me. I remain concerned that elementary students do not experience education and learning about our nation's history from multiple perspectives. Whitewashed, sanitized learning leaves students unable to connect our nation's account of racism to current events (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Teachers' inability, or unwillingness, to engage in teaching that acknowledges race and racism limits students' opportunities to engage with historical and

[1] This study followed the advice of Glover (2020), capitalizing the "B" in Black; Glover wrote, "[c]apitalizing the 'B' in Black should become standard use to describe people, culture, art and communities" (2020). Additionally, this study adhered to Laws (2020) recommendation to not capitalize the "w" in "white" to avoid assigning the same meaning to the word "white" as "Black."

current content and perspectives that can effect change at the individual, group, system, and societal levels (Howard, 2018). The idea that racism is a part of society can be directly related to how we teach specific issues. For example, Alim and Paris (2017) state:

> Students need the historical and cultural knowledge of the role police play as a paramilitary organization in U.S. society that is, their obligation to protect capital, whites, and their property- to critically deconstruct the discourse of 'all lives matter.' Providing a more accurate and nuanced representation of history would help young people to understand the degradation of Black bodies and the need to interrupt the inclusion of 'all' in the lives that matter. (pp. 201-202)

Presenting content from a perspective that can critically connect the past to current issues is essential for students to contextualize events.

Statement of the Problem

As of June 2021, 22 states have proposed or passed legislation restricting the discussion/teachings about concepts related to race and racism (Char et al., 2021). Participants for this study were only selected from Tennessee since it was one of the states in 2021 to pass legislation restricting classroom discussions on race and racism. Tennessee's Senate Bill 0623[2] was signed into law by Governor Bill Lee on May 25, 2021. This bill, which is commonly linked to Critical Race Theory, outlines topics that can and cannot be discussed in the public-school classroom. Restrictions include banning

[2] AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 4 and Title 49, relative to education (2020) Tennessee General Assembly Legislation (tn.gov)

discussions about meritocracy being inherently racist, that the United States or Tennessee is inherently racist, and that privilege exists for certain races but not for others.

To further frame this study, it is not only important to understand Tennessee's SB 0623, but also the two ideas that conceptualize this study, which include: 1) understanding Critical Race Theory and 2) the discrepancy between the demographics of teachers and the demographics of students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). These two factors are critical for teacher understanding because racism permeates deep in society and changes forms (Bell, 1992; Yosso, 2005). Understanding racism in the United States is essential for teachers because they should advocate for the inclusion of Students' of Color experiences in the classroom to facilitate an environment in which all students can feel validated and thus learn.

There is a lack of research about discussions regarding race and racism in elementary schools that highlight teachers' voices. Historical and present-day realities make it increasingly crucial for white teachers to understand their place in a racialized society and the need to be prepared with the appropriate tools to address race and racism in their classrooms effectively. As more and more states pass laws that ban/restrict classroom discussions about concepts relating to race and racism, teachers' roles are increasingly critical. As such, this study sought to explore the experiences of teachers related to race and racism and the impacts of restrictive legislation on their experience.

Understanding Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a crucial lens for examining racism. CRT includes six tenants: the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017;

Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson- Billings, 2014), counter-storytelling/ experiential learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), interest convergence (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1999), whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), the critique of liberalism (Delgado, 1995), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). These tenets comprise a framework to examine issues while centering race as the primary lens to understand systems; specifically, the educational system. An example of the permanence of racism, is present-day oppression in the United States (e.g., the overrepresentation of African Americans in the prison system), which can be traced from the Jim Crow Era to its roots in slavery. Racism is not a thing of the past; teachers are not justified in ignoring it, nor will students benefit from continued avoidance (Brown & Brown, 2011; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Sue, 2016). For example, when the PST chose departure to deal with topics related to racism, she and the students missed the opportunity to discuss the impact of the Confederate flag and the significance it holds in a country where systemic racism exists.

While the prison system and the Confederate flag are examples of covert racism, Bell (1992) discussed many other forms of racism, including the revision of history to make it more palatable for white people; often referred to as whitewashing. Ladson-Billings (1998) illustrated this idea when discussing the inaccurate nature of the information presented as historical "facts" taught in schools, especially those about African Americans. She provided an example of "the race-neutral or colorblind perspective, evident in the way the curriculum presents people of color…" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18), stating:

> …Rosa Parks is reduced to a tired seamstress instead of a long-time participant in social justice endeavors, as evidenced by her work at the Highlander Folk School to prepare for a confrontation with segregationist ideology. Or, Martin Luther King, Jr. becomes a sanitized folk hero who enjoyed the full support of "good Americans" rather than a disdained scholar and activist whose vision extended to social justice causes throughout the world and challenged the USA on issues of economic injustice and aggression in Southeast Asia… (p. 18)

This whitewashing exemplifies covert forms of racism, which not only indicates that it has not been eradicated, but is also perpetuated in many aspects of U.S. society.

Bell (1992) further discussed how racial neutrality (i.e., color blindness) "encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past" (p. 574). With the ever-evolving nature of racism, it can be easy for those not directly affected to believe that racism no longer exists nor impacts the daily lives of Americans. However, Feagin (2006) states that systemic racism is still prevalent in society; systemic racism "encompasses a broad range of white-racist dimensions: the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society" (p. 2). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), racism can also be difficult to recognize because of the constantly changing nature of society.

While lynching may not occur in the same form as the Jim Crow Era, racism and the ensuing violence are still an ever-present part of U.S. society. Because of so many Americans' unwillingness to even acknowledge the existence of systemic racism, there have seen mass protests sparked by the murders of Black people including Ahmaud

Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in late spring 2020. The ensuing media coverage further illuminated the issues, placing teachers in critical positions to have honest conversations and discussions about systemic racism with their students. Such classroom discussions can potentially educate generations of children who will grow up identifying, questioning, and dismantling systemic racism.

Student and Teacher Demographics

As a white teacher who works in elementary schools, I have taught Junior Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades. My experiences align with statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in that, for most of my career, my colleagues identified as white females. At the same time, the student body was, on average, much more diverse. In the 2017-2018 school year, 79% of public-school teachers identified as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). From fall 2009 to fall 2030, white student enrollment in public schools is anticipated to decrease from 54% to 43% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Students of Color accounted for 46% of public-school students in fall 2009 and are expected to increase to 57% by fall 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This data illustrates that most teachers have very different lived experiences than many students (Buchanan, 2015; Sheare et al., 2015). The inability to relate to the effects of racism experienced by many of their students, coupled with the need for discussions about race and racism, makes clear the necessity for white teachers to develop tools to better engage with students who directly experience racism (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; DeNicola & Franquiz, 2006; Sue, 2016). This has become more imperative as we see racial tensions

and mass protests at the forefront of U.S. life since spring 2020, further illustrating the unacceptably slow progress toward racial equality.

Significance of the Study

Racism is a reality for millions of Americans, permeating all systems—justice, housing, and education, to name a few. Race-related inequities in the United States date to 1619, when the first slave ships arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Racism in the U.S. has evolved from slavery to Jim Crow laws, race-related police brutality, and mass incarceration. In the years 2004-2015, an average of 250,000 people per year were victims of hate crimes in the United States (Masucci & Langton, 2017), demonstrating that overt acts of racism continue to occur .

The United States has not eliminated racial segregation, despite legislation intended to do so. Forty years after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, schools were segregated again. (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). In a more recent case in Alabama, a judge allowed a town to secede from a school district serving mostly African Americans (Kenney, 2017), illustrating how contemporary U.S. society has regressed. These examples of racism, often steeped in segregation, provide evidence that racism is permanent and endemic, once again pointing to teachers' need to engage in discussions about race with students to help them contextualize current issues. However, despite this need, the literature lacks in examining racially diverse teachers' perceptions.

This study sought to provide more insight into the experiences of how elementary teachers discuss race and racism in the classroom. It is important to understand teachers' feelings about these topics to provide both pre-service and in-service, as well as all who

work in education, with tools for effectively addressing race and racism in the elementary classroom to create a more equitable learning environment for every student.

Research Question

This research study focused on understanding how elementary teachers approach race and racism discussions. The following question guided the study:

> How do elementary school teachers experience and address race and racism in their schools and classrooms?

Assumptions

During this study, I made assumptions that the discourse presented by a Teacher of Color would more fully embrace discussion of the topics of race and racism. Based on personal anecdotal experiences supported by limited research, white teachers have more difficulty and less willingness to engage in these discussions, a perspective echoed by DiAngelo (2006). Another assumption I made is that teachers, in general, are uncertain which information and content related to race and racism are developmentally appropriate. I also assumed that my participants would be truthful and authentic in their responses; and thus, speak their truth during the interviews.

Definitions

For consistency, the following terms and definitions are used in this study.

Elementary: "Elementary schools are schools serving children in either pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through fifth grade" (Brace, 2011, p. 7)

***Race*:** "The endowment of a group or concept with a delineation, name, or reality based on historical, contextual, political, or other social considerations" (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010, p. S31)

Racism: "The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied" (Lourde, 1981, p. 278)

Race Talk: Discussions and conversation surrounding race and racially related concepts (Alvarez, 2018)

School Environment: "Broadly characterized by its facilities, classrooms, school-based health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices" (National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.)

Whiteness: A characteristic associated with unearned privilege based on specific phenotypical characteristics (Harris, 1993)

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One, I presented a foundation for this doctoral dissertation. I discussed the background, rationale, and significance of the study. The problem statement reinforced the need to gain more insight into how race and racism are taught and discussed in elementary schools to better inform professional development and teacher education programs. I also presented the research question that guided this study.

In conclusion, when the teacher population identifies as predominately white, living a white experience with white privilege, educators need to constantly evaluate how they teach. Understanding that racism remains prevalent and has only changed its form, white people cannot pretend it does not exist and cannot erase it from history (Miller &

Harris, 2018). If children cannot understand what has happened in the past, then they cannot contextualize contemporary society.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One consisted of the study's purpose, significance, and rationale. Additionally, I defined key terms and discussed my assumptions. Chapter Two is an in-depth literature review. Chapter Three presents the theoretical and methodological frameworks, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), critical narrative inquiry, participants, data collection procedures, and verification techniques. Chapter Four includes the narrative of the three participants. Chapter Five discusses the findings, and I present the study implications in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter One set a background and foundation for this doctoral dissertation study and presented the research problem and questions. This chapter provides an in-depth, cohesive literature review, contextualizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as related to elementary education, with CRT in education and issues of race in schools specifically addressed. Following the discussion of CRT, there is an extensive literature review regarding how race impacts curriculum, teachers, and students. These studies provide a relevant background for my dissertation and contextualize the potential impact of Tennessee's SB 0623.

The complexities of discussing race and racism in the elementary classroom are fraught with historical biases and systemic racism. While it is essential to examine how conversations around race and racism occur, their absence also deserves a particular examination. Freire (1993), in his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, described,

> Banking education…attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal specific facts that explain how men exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition that unveils reality. (p.71)

When having conversations focused on race and racism, teachers risk engaging in a banking education system; however, these discussions can be approached from a *problem-posing* method. The banking education system relegates people into specific

places in society, while the problem-posing process seeks to provide a critical understanding of the world. These two systems propel students to either an oppressive form of education or one in which they can help access, and possibly disrupt, power in the dominant society (Ezekiel, 2019). Thus, one can conclude that by not having critical discussions about race and racism, students are not receiving the education necessary to fully engage in society.

I employed several search tactics for identifying research literature relevant to how teachers interact with controversial issues in the classroom. First, investigating EBSCO and ERIC databases, the search terms used included "race talk," "controversial issues," "sensitive issues in elementary/or primary schools," "race/racism in elementary schools," "teachers' perceptions on race talk." To further the search, Google Scholar was utilized to maximize findings. Similar search terms were used, with the most successful being the terms "controversial issues/topics in elementary education" and "race talk in elementary education." These terms returned valuable results; however, many studies centered on middle and high school and studies abroad. The remaining research studies conducted at the elementary level were valuable contributions to the body of knowledge forming this dissertation's basis. Thus, while elementary studies are the focus, peripheral studies from international and secondary education were included to lay a strong foundation for overarching issues and practices.

Through an extensive literature review, I identified studies focused both on students and teachers which explored race and racism in elementary schools. Focus on students is especially important given the recent impact of legislation such as Tennessee's

SB 0623 since there is much discussion about how children, especially young children, can effectively process information about race and racism. First, I address Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the lens that frames this study. The tenets of CRT are introduced through an explanation and examples of each term. Following the exploration of CRT, I provide a basis for this study through a discussion of the themes from the research literature.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been a part of the discussion about race and racism in academia since the 1970s (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harris,1993). Although CRT was born from Critical Legal Studies, its progression has been mapped from the legal system onto the realm of education. Central figures of CRT include Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alan Freeman, Patricia Williams, and Richard Delgado, who each contributed to the foundations of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013). CRT emerged from these scholars' dissatisfaction with legal scholarship, as a result of their frustration with the slow reform of structural racism prevalent in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and the perspective that a greater level of racial justice was needed (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

A central idea of CRT is that racism in America is systematic and used to propel white privilege forward at the expense of People of Color (Bell, 1995). Laws, policies, and even movements intended to benefit People of Color, in actuality, are instead used to benefit white culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theorists attempt to single out the erroneous concept of neutrality as, according to the theory, it does not exist

in fields such as law and education (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda, 1991). Central goals of CRT are examining and eliminating systems of oppression (Orozco, 2011). In this section, an overview of the tenets will be discussed: permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, interest convergence, whiteness as property, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality. An in-depth discussion will set a foundation for examining conversations about race in schools. This foundation is essential for a broader understanding of the data generated from interviews focused on how teachers experience these conversations as well as how they are affected by Tennessee's SB 0623.

Origin and Overview

Critical Legal Studies found its beginnings in Gramsci and Marxist critiques of social structures (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lynn & Parker, 2006). These critiques were largely based on "legitimation, domination, hegemony, and consciousness" (Hunt, 1986, p. 9). Employing a Marxist critique of race in the United States, Young (2012) found that race plays an essential part in creating a class-based legal system in the United States; "race has and continues to be a constant and necessary component of American capitalism" (p. 509). Scholars of Color and feminist scholars were not fully content with the direction of Critical Legal Studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harris, 1993; Tushnet, 1990), and as a result, there were lags in structural reformation resulting from racism taking on different forms after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; by the 1990s many gains made during that era were also being legally dismantled. One such example is how the prosecution and eventual imprisonment of People, especially Men, of Color, rapidly increased in the decades that followed the Civil Rights Movement (Graff,

2015). Critical Legal Studies is the antecedent to Critical Race Theory, which focuses on racism as a cause of inequality in society (Bell, 1992; 1995; Matsuda, 1991). From the inception of Critical Race Theory, descendent theories were also formed to support issues related to power structures.

Tenets of CRT

Throughout the inception of CRT, six central tenets have been identified, although some scholars include seven tenets. The additional tenet not included in this study is the social construction of race (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). While there are differences among scholars, the six that I have identified as being the most relevant to this study are: the permanence of racism; counter-story telling; interest convergence; whiteness as property; critique of liberalism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013; Lynn, 2002); and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

The Permanence of Racism

The first tenet of Critical Race Theory is that racism is permanent (Bell, 1992, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson- Billings, 2013). However, as Delgado (1992) explained, Derrick Bell, who many credit with being the father of CRT, ascribed to a racial realism philosophy. This philosophy, which many interpret as a pessimist's view, speaks to the constant continuation of racism. Bell pointed to the constant setbacks of People of Color to further support his position (Delgado, 1992). People belonging to the racial majority can point to *Brown v Board of Education*, or more currently to the election of President Obama, and feel less guilt and responsibility (Curry,

2008; Delgado, 1992). To further understand how race permeates the social fabric of the United States, Ladson-Billings (2014) explains:

> …to get at multiple social significations other than race is not a sleight of hand designed to instantiate notions of 'colorblindness.' Rather, this work is designed to remind us how difficult it is to 'get past race' when it remains constitutive of what it means to be American. (p. xii)

Racism perpetuates, according to racial realists, because it is normalized through its existence in every aspect of our society (Bell, 1995; Lynn, 2002). Lynn (2002) describes racism as "cancer festering beneath the social surface of the American landscape… a natural consequence of an inherently unjust social structure" (p. 120). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that institutional and structural racism are the actual opponents of Students of Color, specifically the manner in which those systems perpetuate the poverty cycle within communities of color. These social structures include the school-to-prison pipeline, school funding disparities, and implicit biases within curriculum and policies. Critical Race theorists argue that racism is in a state of permanence, a pervasive part of society; therefore, equality cannot be authentically achieved (Bell, 1995). To illustrate this point, Bell (1995) states,

> …but history shows with equal clarity, though it is less frequently acknowledged, that indications of black success and thus possible black superiority result in racist outrage. Most of the many race riots in this nation's history were sparked by white outrage over black success. (p. 895)

For the last three decades, Critical Race Theory has branched out to include different marginalized groups, which has helped address additional inequities that exist outside of the Black/white binary.

Counter-storytelling

The second tenet of Critical Race Theory is "story-telling" as a way to obtain information (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Narratives are often criticized as a subjective form of science, but CRT presents them as an objective framework (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This can be problematic because, traditionally, educational research has been more quantitative, while racism is perceived as a subjective experience (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These stories, or narratives, are qualitative and provide insight into the reality of others, while additionally acknowledging that there is no universal truth in Critical Race Theory (Cook, 2013).

Despite the dominant discourse anchored in a white perspective, counter-narratives, such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Kinloch et al., 2020) emerge to combat mainstream discourse. BLM took a counter-narrative and brought it to the mainstream (Kinloch et al., 2020). These perspectives add to the literature, creating a more critical picture of the dominant narrative, which, at its core, focuses on a single, Eurocentric viewpoint. Critical Race Theory uses both "stock stories" and "counter-stories" (Ladson-Billings, 2014) to explain personal histories and create conversations around life events.

Stock stories are those used to perpetuate the status quo of racial inequality. For example, the Black/white achievement gap narrative discourse hides behind colorblind

and merit-based ideologies (Love, 2004). These narratives perpetuate the idea that race is not seen or that everyone has the opportunity to succeed, thus clouding the experiences of those impacted by systemic and institutional racism (Love, 2004). While stock stories are used to support and uphold the narrative of white supremacy and used to provide a cloak of invisibility for white privilege, counter-stories provide an outlet for those realities to be heard (Love, 2004).

Counter-stories are used as personal narratives to debunk the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2014), and, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advocate for, giving a voice to the oppressed as a beginning step toward justice. In education, counter-stories are critical for creating equitable spaces within classrooms. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), "Critical race theory in education is a framework…to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain (white supremacy) in and out of the classroom" (p. 25). In order to dismantle systems that maintain white supremacy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which includes perpetuating the myths of neutrality and meritocracy (Orozco, 2011), it is essential to value the experiential knowledge of People of Color.

Considering story-telling in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) state, "…without authentic voices of People of Color (as teachers, parents, administration, students, and community members), it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their community" (p. 58). If educators remain focused on the stock story, they fail to address the valid reasons for discrepancies. Ladson-Billings (2014) framed this tenet, "racism is still a pervasive part of the American landscape; it is,

therefore, important for CRT scholars in education to tell these counter stories to challenge the story of white supremacy" (p. 4). The ideology behind meritocracy in the U.S. provides a backdrop for white supremacy to exist (Love, 2004). Khalifa and colleagues (2013) remark that story-telling gives oppressed people and marginalized students a voice to tell an "opposing reality" (p. 494). The value of narrative story-telling is imperative for providing rich data that may otherwise go unrecorded, thus omitting a considerable amount of data from research.

Interest Convergence

Interest convergence is the concept that equity and equality will only happen when that change greatly benefits the racial majority (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Scholars have noted this pattern throughout history; People of Color advance only when there is some benefit for the racial majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, at times, what on the surface looks like an advancement for People of Color is merely an afterthought to white people.

Examples of interest convergence include *Brown v Board of Education,* which is a poignant case in point (Bell, 1980; Delgado, 1995; hooks, 1994; Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998). On the surface, *Brown v Board of Education* does indeed outlaw school segregation, which served as a significant move toward equality (Bell, 1980). Simultaneously, the United States was criticized for its segregated institutions during the Cold War (Bell, 2005). Interest convergence explains that the main intention was to better the United States' image to the world by desegregating schools that hurt the Black community and students (Bell, 2004; hooks, 1994). Eventually, the Brown decision

proved unsuccessful in maintaining desegregation (Bell, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ladson-Billings (1998) describes another example of interest convergence, which occurred when Arizona failed to observe Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. The boycotts that ensued hurt the state financially, and so the decision was ultimately reversed due to the negative fiscal impact, not because it was morally correct. It was a matter of prioritizing financial interests (Ladson- Billings, 1998).

Whiteness as Property

A third tenet of Critical Race Theory is the concept of "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993). Harris illustrates the idea that to be white has traditionally been used as an exclusionary tactic;

> The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by excluding others deemed to be 'not white.' The whiteness possessors grant the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inherent in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. (p. 1736)

White people have historically benefited from rights and freedoms bestowed upon them for identifying as white. This "white privilege" permeates traditional and current history (Given, 2008). This privilege also serves to simultaneously promote and oppress different segments of the population. McIntosh's (1988) well-known list of 46 privileges illustrates how everyday life is affected by events that may go unnoticed by white people. For

example, “If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race” (p. 33).

Whiteness as a property is evident in the classroom as well. If one examines the texts and curricular materials utilized in classrooms, it is evident that perspectives from People of Color are excluded from central knowledge (Moreau, 2003). For example, the exclusion of Thomas Jefferson’s relationships with his slaves and the lack of recognition of their offspring contributes to the whitewashing and censoring of information (Moreau, 2003). Other examples can include how history portrays European settlers—eliminating, or downplaying, the consequences for Native Americans as well as including only sanitized versions of events from the Civil Rights Movement (Peterson, 2008).

Whiteness as property can also be seen in the discourse used in addressing race and racism in the classroom. In a study by DiAngelo (2006), pre-service teachers took part in a discourse study to further understand how they dealt with the subject of racism. According to DiAngelo (2006), there was a feeling of avoidance among some white educators. Being able to avoid discussions related to racism demonstrates the power, privilege, and ownership to pick and choose when to engage. People who live with the direct effects of racism do not get this privilege. If teachers choose not to discuss race and racism, then ultimately, the right to exclude is being utilized to oppress those who do not possess whiteness. Whiteness provides the avenue and privilege to discuss racism or maintain a colorblind mentality; however, People of Color do not have this privilege (DiAngelo, 2006).

Critique of Liberalism

Critical Race Theory also challenges liberalism as its laws and legal structures operate as if they were above the realm of racism and discrimination (Delgado, 1995). However, Critical Race theorists argue that laws are neither colorblind nor neutral since they essentially function to reinforce the privilege of those who create and enforce them. Interest convergence aligns with the critique of liberalism as the change will only happen if it benefits the culture or race in power (Bell, 1992; 1995). According to Delgado (2006), "only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are done will do much to ameliorate misery" (p. 27).

Laws and policies that govern education are also not neutral. No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), which propelled the testing and accountability movement, was centered on standardized test scores. These tests have been faulted for being inequitable, culturally biased, and contributing to the Black/white achievement gap (Berlak, 2005). Despite the evidence and research condemning standardized tests as biased, they are still widely used by our public education system. At best, standardized tests predict family wealth and indicate no connection between long-term academic success and test scores (Berlak, 2005). To perpetuate a conventional system in accountability further allows false neutrality and institutional racism to exist (Berkak, 2005). Students of Color have not benefited from the neoliberal policies associated with No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015); however, business contracts and people associated with

the accountability movement have successfully maintained the “white status quo” (Khalifia et al., 2013, p. 493). This status quo continues because systemic racism fails to be adequately addressed by these policies. Institutional racism continues “because (policy leaders) lend the cloak of science to policies that have denied, and are continuing to deny, persons of color equal access to educational and job opportunities" (Berlak, 2005, p. 229).

Intersectionality

One goal of CRT is eliminating racial oppression, which is part of a bigger picture of eliminating all forms of oppression (Solórzano, 1997; Tate, 1997). Crenshaw (1988) indicates that Students of Color are expected to leave their racial identity outside the classroom, but are expected to bring it to consideration when requested by professors. This is part of what Crenshaw (1988) calls the objectification, subjectification, and alienation of Students of Color. While she critiques the position of neutrality, Crenshaw (1988) offers the term “perspectivelessness” (p. 2), which reflects the belief that one can remove their identity and look at situations void of any personal perspective.

Knowing that this work is part of a larger goal, scholars who use intersectionality in their work acknowledge it as an evolving process (Capper, 2015). Crenshaw (1991) initially noted that subscribing to identity politics erases the differences within a particular group. Crenshaw (1991) states,

> The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite-that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of

> difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women (pp. 1242).

Structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality are three categories that Crenshaw (1991) introduces as a means to examine the complex experiences of Women of Color. This illustrates how experiences related to oppression are more complicated than just a singular identity that suffers under systems of power. In regards to public school education, teachers have to consider all the identities of their students (Capper, 2015).

CRT in Education

Critical Race Theory plays an essential role in understanding the inequities that exist in the U.S. education system (Solòranzo & Yosso, 2002). Equity is a concept that is often mistaken for equality; understanding the difference between the two is critical when examining issues relating to race and education. Equality is ensuring that every person receives the same treatment regardless of the various supports or modifications needed. In contrast, equity assures that people receive what they need to access success (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

Ladson-Billings (2014) poignantly states that one has to look no further than events in United States' history to see that race still matters, as she credits Carter Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois for purporting the idea of race as central to inequity. One

example from recent history is the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. The failed infrastructure and response to the disaster reflected long-standing policies that marginalized People of Color (Stivers, 2007). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) discuss the issue of structural racism, exemplified by Hurricane Katrina, as it relates to the United States education system. These researchers determined that while poverty ties innately to lower school achievement among Students of Color, the root of poverty links inextricably to institutional and structural racism. As with Hurricane Katrina, the policies that contributed to the devastation of Communities of Color are the same types of policies that contribute to Children of Color not receiving equitable educational opportunities as compared to their white counterparts. While gender and class result in systemic inequity and intersect with race, they do not account for all the inequitable outcomes witnessed in schools today (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005).

Race, in the United States, is a primary factor of inequity. When examining race and whiteness as property, Lea and Sims (2008) explain:

> Whiteness is a complex, hegemonic, and dynamic set of mainstream socio-economic processes and ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting (cultural scripts) that function to obscure the power, privilege, and practices of the dominant social elite. Whiteness drives oppressive individual, group, and corporate practices that adversely impact schools, the broader U.S. society, and, indeed, societies worldwide. (pp. 1-2)

Recognizing whiteness in the classroom entails identifying some students' privileges that marginalize Students of Color (Lea & Sims, 2008). In people who are socially constructed as white, whiteness serves as a system that provides power and privilege while at the same time oppressing and holding People of Color to a disadvantage.

Inequities in Schools. According to Ladson-Billings (2014), "the cause of (African American) poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structured racism" (p. 18). This assertion emphasizes that a) racism is ubiquitous in our entire U.S. society, and b) it will take considerable examination and treatment to correct these inequities. Just one example of inequity that ultimately results in a myriad of other inequities is the issue of property taxes. School funding, which is predominantly provided through property taxes, results in considerable inequity when property taxes are lower due to lower property values or a downturn in the economy (Leachman et al., 2017). Thus, lower property values result in fewer funds for local schools. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) continue to argue that if racism were isolated, as opposed to systemic, there would be far more instances of excellence and equity within and across public schools.

When considering the writings of bell hooks (1994), it becomes clear that education for African Americans has neither been equal nor equitable. Before desegregation, separate but equal never fulfilled the promise of equality. Furthermore, despite education reforms, equity has long been ignored. hooks (1994) described how marginalized students were further marginalized by the deficit thinking of teachers and administrators. hooks (1994) recalled, "We left a world where teachers believed that to

educate Black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes" (p. 3). This was in direct opposition to what hooks (1994) explained as a pedagogy that contextualized her cultural and family experiences within her classroom experience in an "all-black school" (p.3).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2000) ushered in the era of accountability and the resulting standardized testing prevalent in public education today. Despite the reform bill's expiration in 2015, the effects of these tests and the resulting exacerbation of inequities persist. With their origins rooted in the Eugenics movement, standardized tests disregard students' various backgrounds and cultures, resulting in yet another example of the lack of equity due to colorblindness (Matias & Liou, 2015). Standardized tests further marginalize Students of Color by rendering placements in lower-ranked or special education classes due to their performance. In contrast, white students generally perform better, further widening the Black-white achievement gap. As discussed earlier, the age of accountability and standardized tests furthers the interests of the white status quo and continues to be biased against Students of Color (Berlak, 2005).

In sum, the inequities faced in schools are caused by institutional racism. Freire (1993) took to task the multiple systems of oppression and the condition of the oppressed:

> The oppressor is in solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who unjustly deal with [oppression]...True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love...To

> affirm that men are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce. (pp. 34-35)

Freire discussed that freedom cannot be achieved through empty words and promises, but through concrete actions. Unfortunately, as can be seen in the history of pockets of reform(s), policies, and practices, the United States is not an equitable society. While many espouse the belief that American schools should be equitable, few take the tangible action discussed by Freire to make them so. The following section reviews research in which action steps were taken to move education in a more just and equitable direction.

Teachers. Teachers are invaluable facilitators of knowledge in schools, especially in the early grades. However, researchers have found that teachers' feelings often inhibit them from fully engaging in discussions of race and racism. Teachers have reported feeling apprehensive when it comes to engaging in "race talks" (Alvarez, 2018) because of the uncertainty of what is appropriate, the fear of controversy, and a lack of training in multi-cultural/anti-racist pedagogy (Alvarez, 2018; Bolgatz, 2005; Buchanan, 2015; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006).

In a quantitative study, Alvarez (2018) collected and analyzed two data sets related to teachers' feelings and perceptions of race. In one data set, 495 teacher responses found that teachers with a decade or more experience, as well as those who attended a teacher preparation program with an anti-racist emphasis, felt better prepared to have race-based discussions in class. In a corresponding study (Alvarez, 2018), 336 white teachers were interviewed about their feelings regarding police violence and race. While

the teachers noted this was important to discuss, they overwhelmingly opted out of these discussions based on fear and the desire to protect their jobs.

Concern About Race and Racism in Schools. Many researchers vouch for the importance of engaging students in discussions about race and racism as an essential component for moving toward the overall goal of developing informed citizens (Clabough, et.al., 2011; Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Harwood & Hahn, 1990). This is a standard in the National Council of Social Studies' (NCSS) (2011) professional standards. Using information gleaned from NCSS (2001), Clabough and colleagues (2011) stated, "(students should be) aware of issues, events, that have an impact on people at the local, state, national, and global level" (p. 32). The NCSS perspective centers on students as critical consumers of information on all levels, which means that issues relating to race and racism are imperative for all students to understand. However, there is significant evidence that teachers do not engage in these discussions in their classrooms.

Teachers have reported concerns when it comes to discussing race and racism with children (Bolgatz, 2005; Buchanan, 2015; Hollingsworth, 2009). According to the work of Alvarez (2018), fear of inciting controversy and concern about age-appropriate content dominate the negative feelings of teachers when they consider engaging students in conversations about race and racism. It is important to note that these studies were conducted prior to the implementation of any restrictive measures, such as Tennessee's SB 0623.

Teacher Fear. There is significant evidence that teachers are fearful and often reluctant to bring race-related issues to the forefront of instruction (Bolgatz, 2005; Copenhaver, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kello, 2016; Philpott et al., 2011; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Understanding why teachers feel this way is critical to gaining access to the bigger picture and understanding students' and teachers' silence. Alvarez (2018) noted that many of these hesitancies were due to fear of controversy and the overall age-appropriateness of the topic. To combat this phenomenon of teacher fear, researchers (Alvarez, 2018; Singleton & Hayes, 2008) recommend more professional development and a greater level of attention to the skill of engaging in critical conversations in teacher education programs. Successful teachers are characterized as those who operate outside of fear and hesitation (Alvarez, 2018), and who are also knowledgeable about critical, multi-cultural education (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). If professional programs prepare teachers in multi-cultural and anti-racist pedagogies, research suggests these teachers will enter classrooms with the tools to effectively address race and racism.

Mirroring the issues teachers felt in Alvarez's (2018) study, Buchanan (2015) studied 62 elementary pre-service teachers' reluctance to discuss race in the classroom. Only two of the 62 teacher participants identified as Latinx or Multi-racial. The majority of the participants expressed that they did not have opportunities to work with people of different races in or outside of schools in their own experiences. Of all the participants, 91% referred to race as controversial and problematic to discuss and noted that discussions of race can offend students and were too complicated. Buchanan (2015) also found that preservice teachers' overall willingness to engage in discussions of race and

racism was directly related to the population with whom they were speaking, such as friends and family, elementary students and parents, and their university classmates. The population with which participants felt the least comfortable discussing race were elementary students and families (Buchanan, 2015).

In a study focused on current classroom teachers, Copenhaver (2000) used data from two parallel studies that involved how Children of Color reacted to texts in classroom environments which were racially integrated, one of which she conducted in the form of a self-study and another from which she collected data related to other teachers and classrooms. One participant in the study, an African-American female, brought multicultural literature to the forefront in her class, explicitly reading the story "Nappy Hair." While Copenhaver (2000) acknowledged she had yet to meet a white teacher brave enough to read that book aloud, she noted that her African-American participant even said, "'Oh, I'll probably get fired for this'" (p. 12).

Based on observations of the children in the study (Copenhaver, 2000), it was apparent that children in one class did not explicitly talk about race and were unaware of microaggressions displayed toward Children of Color. The classroom teacher, a white female, made a concerted effort to bring in multi-cultural literature; however, racism was almost always discussed in past terms, with white children much more ill-equipped to discuss race, except for past events such as slavery. The white students were also much less able to connect the racially-excluding behaviors of their classmates to the explicit racial themes in the literature discussed in class. In the interviews, teachers admitted that there was a fear surrounding explicit race discussions, which included concerns that those

discussions would lead children to make remarks that teachers were not emotionally prepared to handle. Despite the amount of multicultural literature and the teacher's commitment to social justice, there were still blind spots, such as the lack of discussion of racism and race in explicit terms that led to racial exclusion among peers, which Copenhaver coined "the consequence of silence" (p. 14).

In another study, fear and hesitancy among white teachers were found to be barriers to providing an equitable education for all students (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Copenhaver-Johnson (2006) discussed how two first-grade teachers displayed hesitancy when reading aloud texts related to racism. There was notable silence and an absence of connection between issues such as the Civil Rights Movement and current topics. The children in the classroom expressed confusion and inconsistencies surrounding race issues that may have stemmed from the teacher’s silence. For example, the children in the study condemned the treatment of Ruby Bridges, but displayed exclusionary tactics on the playground based on race. This silence, with regard to the playground, was due to the teacher’s fear of stepping outside the box and exploring topics that could help children understand many dimensions of our complex society. Not engaging in these conversations is detrimental to students in the present and the future, further contributing to whiteness and perpetuating colorblindness for white students (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006).

Overall, researchers consistently note that teachers exhibit fear relating to explicitly discussing race and racism with elementary students (Bolgatz, 2005; Buchanan, 2015; Copenhaver, 2000; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). While this fear may be real or

imagined, it is clear that teachers feel fear, which leads to hesitancy in addressing themes related to race in a manner that engages the class in critical discussions (Bolgatz, 2005; Copenhaver, 2000).

Age Appropriateness. A child's age has also been of particular interest to researchers (Brown et al., 2017) in relation to racial conversations. The general concern is that young children cannot process concepts such as race or systemic racism (Bolgatz, 2005); however, in reality, most children are already privy to these ideas of race in one way or another (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). By three-months old, babies prefer faces from their ethnic group (Kelly et al., 2005) and 3-5 year-olds begin demonstrating in-group biases (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Furthermore, estimates suggest that by the fall of 2027, 55% of children in American schools will be Students of Color (Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups, n.d.) who do not have the luxury white students experience being able to ignore racial issues. Thus, acknowledging the awareness young children already have of race and racism is essential.

While many teachers are well-intentioned, labeling these topics taboo and thus avoiding them is hardly helpful for students, even young ones. This thinking could explain why researchers often conduct their work at the middle-school and high-school levels instead of the elementary level (Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Journell, 2011; Kello, 2016; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Sharp, 2009; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016). As Husband (2015) acknowledged, little is known about how young children interact with the concepts of race and racism in the classroom.

Aligned with this avoidant thinking is the notion that younger students may misinterpret the information. Struthers (2016) noted that teachers were concerned that students would misuse information regarding human rights education to disrupt the classroom environment, effectively disobeying their teachers. For example, when a typical disagreement may occur in the classroom, children might express, "I know my human rights" (p. 138), which may be used in contexts that are not human rights violations. Struthers (2016) conducted a study in England in which 378 primary (elementary) level teachers were surveyed and 44 follow-up interviews were conducted regarding whether or not teaching human rights education was too controversial for students. Teachers indicated that they were, indeed, hesitant to teach human rights at the primary level because they felt it was too controversial, too abstract, and too biased for some students.

There was also peripheral concern of parents being upset that the content taught was deemed age-appropriate, but parents may hold fewer objections depending on the context of human rights (e.g. some may be more supportive of immigration issues as opposed to LGBTQIA issues). However, the participants noted they would not use the term "human rights" with the parents for fear of backlash. The participants thought that the impulsive adverse reactions from parents would "not be worth it" and that it was "safer not to teach it" (Struthers, 2016, p.141). Struthers (2016) noted that this sentiment was concurrent with research in the area:

> These empirical observations accord with much of the academic commentary on this area, where opposition to the inclusion of controversial issues within the

> curriculum has been consistently associated with concerns regarding the age-appropriateness of specific topics. (p. 142)

Reluctance to engage children in specific conversations can be attributed to the desire to maintain their innocence, which echoes Alexander's (1984) cocoon theory. According to Alexander (1984), adults should shield young children from realities that can be controversial for even adults to handle. However, this innate desire to protect children can often backfire. Short and Reed (2017) and Maitles and Cowan (2012), who studied teachers who taught about the Holocaust, argued against cocoon theory explaining it is not necessarily in the children's best interests. Short and Reed (2017) wrote about Holocaust education with young children, which mostly focused on teaching tolerance and respect for differences. These skills provided the foundation for discussing the Holocaust in more detail with older children. Maitles and Cowan (2012) echoed those findings, emphasizing that teaching the Holocaust is critical and sets a connection for anti-racist education.

Similar to Buchanan’s (2015) study of pre-service teachers, Simic-Muller and colleagues (2015) conducted ninety-two surveys and nine interviews with pre-service teachers in an attempt to better understand their beliefs about teaching content in real-world contexts. In the sample of pre-service teachers, all wanted to teach elementary school, with the majority expressing interest in early elementary. Interview data suggested a common belief that controversial issues may only be suitable for some, but not all, students. Additionally, the idea that children cannot understand controversial issues, except on a superficial and primary level, permeated the survey and interview

data. Two-thirds of the participants noted that controversial issues in the classroom would be inappropriate for young children, which helps in understanding why teachers with this mindset would avoid discussing or teaching about race-related issues.

Pre-service teachers also mentioned avoiding topics such as race in an attempt, albeit a misguided one, to safeguard against marginalizing specific student populations. However, avoidance of discussions focused on race and racism explicitly silences marginalized students even further (Copenhaver, 2000). One participant in the study discussed that race would not be an issue in an all-white classroom, which furthered the assumption that white children do not engage, nor should they, with race or race-related issues. Additionally, Copenhaver (2000) noted that the surveyed preservice teachers indicated these topics might make students feel uncomfortable if the issue is too relatable. For example, kindergarten children living in poverty may be adversely affected when examples of low-income issues, such as lack of food or housing, are used in content areas such as math.

In a case study by Priest and colleagues (2016), researchers note that few studies have directly explored the interaction between young children and racism through a Critical Race Theory lens. As a result, the researchers embarked on a case study of 67 Australian participants aged 8-12 years old framed in CRT, in which they gathered interview data paired with 45 hours of observations. Their research found that students appeared to be well-aware of racism, and only one school, which had a majority white population, did not discuss racism in-depth.

Only one school did not silence conversations about race; however, most schools in the study chose to focus on culture instead of race. Interestingly, the majority of parents reported only engaging in conversations about race when their children initiated the conversation. Researchers determined that children do notice race and begin to develop their interpretations of people who do not share their backgrounds. However, it is important to note that it was easier for children to identify overt racism instead of more covert racism, such as racially-charged jokes and systemic forms of racism. This makes sense since children are still learning to infer, and covert racism is, in a sense, a practice in inferring (Priest et al., 2016). The authors noted this as an area for teachers to integrate in their classroom instruction.

Safe Environments. Creating a safe environment for children to engage in conversations about race is essential (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Copenhaver, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Coles-Ritchie and Smith (2017) researched how to create more equitable spaces to discuss race, specifically addressing which critical spaces might produce better learning. They interviewed teachers about participating in race talk and found that having a resource, such as *Courageous Conversations* (Singelton & Linton, 2006), was key to teachers feeling more comfortable. Administrator support was also critical for teachers to feel confident engaging in these discussions.

Coles-Ritchie and Smith (2017) stated that it is vital to continue research on how race is examined in elementary schools since it is in those specific spaces that teachers tend to avoid topics related to race and racism. Noting that there is a disconnect between

racism in the past and the racism issues of today, it is also essential for teachers to explicitly connect systemic and institutional racism in their class discussions (Cole-Ritchie & Smith, 2017). Teachers also need to take an active role in creating an environment in which children feel comfortable discussing topics related to race. This can take place when bridging multicultural literature to children's real lives (Copenhaver, 2000). Children enter the classroom with different experiences regarding racism, including children who have personally experienced it and children who do not need to think about it due to their privilege (Copenhaver, 2000; Leonardo, 2004.) While racial socialization begins at a young age, teachers should strive to create a safe place for children to express their own experiences, if they so desire, and address misconceptions.

Milner and Laughter (2015) noted that teachers' intentions to do the best for all students are overwhelmingly present, but their comfort level for discussing issues of race, especially white teachers, was low. This discomfort, or fear, was also noted in other research (Bolgatz, 2005; Copenhaver, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kello, 2016; Philpott et al., 2011; Zambylas & Kambini, 2012). Due to this lack of confidence, teachers adopt a colorblind ideology. Milner and Laughter (2015) found that teachers were much more comfortable using methods and frameworks that dealt with poverty rather than race. More informed curriculums in teacher education programs could be effective for helping teachers engage in conversations involving race.

Knowing how imperative it is to address issues relating to race, and noting the comfort level of teachers, Milner and Laughter (2015) offer a three-prong approach which teacher education programs can implement to help teachers. These approaches

include reforming curriculum in teacher education programs to focus on race, poverty, and the connection between the two. Milner and Laughter (2015) were explicit in noting that People of Color are not impoverished because of race, but it is critical to note the structural issues that contribute to those identities intersecting. When allowed to develop critical thinking skills with the support of a knowledgeable and skilled teacher, students can successfully engage in controversial discussions (Bolgatz, 2005).

Based on an extensive review of the literature, teachers display predominantly negative feelings, primarily fear and uncertainty, associated with discussing race and racism in elementary schools (Bolgatz, 2005; Buchanan, 2015; Copenhaver, 2000; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Priest et al., 2016; Simic-Muller et.al., 2015; Struthers, 2016), as well as concerns about age-appropriateness (Brown et al., 2017), and creating safe environments (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Copenhaver, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006). These issues appear to create a barrier to engaging in open discussions with young children about race and racism.

Students

Studies indicate two components which are essential for student conversations focused on race and racism: meaningful discussion (Brown & Brown, 2011; Tatum, 1994) and developing critical citizens (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012). While many studies have focused on middle and high school students (Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Journell, 2011; Kello, 2016; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Sharp, 2009; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016), the literature

regarding elementary students has focused specifically on developing compassionate citizens (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Clabough et al., 2011; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011).

Meaningful Discussion. Research has identified the importance of engaging in critical race discussions, both for white students and for Students of Color (Brown & Brown, 2011; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Tatum, 1994). While these discussions provide different benefits for both groups of students, both groups do benefit. White students gain critical perspectives that may have been previously silenced, thus increasing empathy and understanding (Tatum, 1994), while Students of Color can voice issues that have been critical in their lives (Brown & Brown, 2011). Tatum (1994) explores this symbiotic transaction;

> Teaching about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered People of Color and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners in the establishment of a more just society. (p. 474)

By shifting this perspective, discussions can take place from a positive position of empowerment.

Not only is engaging from a position of empowerment important, it is essential to engage students of all backgrounds in discussions that build upon critical thinking skills in connecting issues of the past to current racial inequities (Vanderslight, 2002). Thus, it is not enough to merely present multicultural literature; teachers need to be explicit regarding structural racism and current issues (Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Copenhaver, 2000). Sue (2015) added that real and authentic discussions about race are among the

most effective methods for eliminating biases and fear, building empathy and compassion, and raising racial literacy.

Students benefit from engaging in critical conversations about race (Copenhaver, 2000; Brown & Brown, 2011). As Brown and Brown (2011) stated, "all students-particularly those of color-benefit from a classroom curriculum that critically engages race and racism" (p. 10). In their case study, it was apparent how critical teachable moments, such as the concept of racial profiling, played in relating race and racism to the personal lives of students. This study focused mostly on social studies, which is a content area in which race is sure to be a focus. Space must be provided for these critical conversations to exist (Brown & Brown, 2011).

Building on the need for critical conversations, as noted in Brown and Brown (2011), several researchers noted providing teachers with substantial professional development opportunities that involve addressing conversations regarding race and racism can be beneficial (Bolgatz, 2005; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Singleton & Hays, 2008). The authors noted that all teachers should be racially literate, but professional development is needed. Professional development which utilizes resources such as *Courageous Conversations* (Singleton & Hays, 2008), using new verbiage to discuss race, and administration support all help focus more attention on race.

Developing Critical Citizens. One of the primary goals of the National Center for Social Studies (NCSS) is to promote critical citizenship. This goal mirrors the need for critical conversations as discussed by Brown and Brown (2011). At the same time, in their review of the research, Brown and colleagues (2017) noted that despite widespread

racism in our society, few related empirical studies exist. The researchers also discussed how classroom language about race frames three avenues: curricular, discursive, and disruptive. Even though the participant in these case studies avoided race talk as activism such as in Hollingsworth (2009), Brown and colleagues (2017) found that:

> …carefully selected, curricular content may facilitate classroom conversations on race that deepen academic curriculum, facilitate the development of positive social identities for students, and disrupt inequalities; however, how teachers and students use language is critical to accomplish classroom conversations on race. Research suggests the importance of teachers problematizing taken-for-granted interpretive frameworks derived from dominant racial ideologies and the importance of having students make connections between the discussions of race at a distance…and with their own lives close-up. (p. 472)

The importance of using curriculums and language that will promote critical conversations cannot be understated. Teachers need to dismantle frameworks put in place by the dominant racial narrative while encouraging students to make connections to their lived experiences. Overall, the lack of research, paired with the clear need for such aspects of the elementary curriculum, creates a paradox teachers appear to be left to navigate on their own.

Brown and colleagues (2017) found that conversations promoting critical inquiries helped children understand more about racism and other systems of oppression (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012), and that the development of critical citizenship is an important result of engaging in such

inquiries. Understanding the importance of this thinking can come from examining international examples related to current issues in the U.S. (Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008). In a study by Godreau and colleagues (2008), teachers had to look for supplemental materials to provide a complete picture of Puerto Rican history. To contextualize the study, being Black in Puerto Rico held the same negative overtones that permeate American society. Third graders are expected to learn the official story regarding Puerto Rico's history with Africa. The teacher was able to provide additional materials to disrupt the narrative that "addressing Puerto Rico's history of slavery can threaten and disrupt this national narrative of homogeneity and harmony by sparking dialogue about racism, discrimination…" (p. 118). This quote illustrates the importance of discourse to provide accurate information, disrupt misconceptions, and express how discussing history and events can be a positive experience.

Engaging with "controversial" issues in the classroom can be more challenging in Cyprus and Northern Ireland because of the internal divisions these countries deal with (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). In a phenomenological study by Zembylas and Kambani (2012), 18 Greek-Cypriot teachers provided information about their perceptions and emotions related to teaching "controversial" issues in a geographic area that frequently deals with conflict. The rationale in this study for interviewing elementary teachers was the fact that history is an essential element of the curriculum from early on. The participants noted that engaging with controversial issues helps prepare children to understand and participate in the democratic dialogue that is important for all citizens (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). As Hess (2002) noted, controversial issues in a pluralistic

or divided society, like in Northern Ireland and Greece/Cyprus, is more apt to invoke emotions.

In 2006, Rogers and Mosley focused their work on 2nd-grade students in St. Louis, a town notably affected by de facto segregation, in order to determine students' levels of racial literacy. Using literature and discussion, teachers prompted students to critically examine their worlds, both past and present. Not surprisingly, Rogers and Mosley (2006) noted the importance of explicitly engaging with racial themes to develop students' ability to interact with the world in an informed way. In these discussions, the students displayed naming race, although whiteness appeared to be invisible. According to Critical Race Theory, white identities are normalized (Leonardo, 2004; Rogers & Mosley, 2006), which may play a role in how white children react to white characters in the text, *The Bus Ride* by William Miller. The story lacked an explicit nature of discussing racism as a structure and did not explicitly name race. This lack of naming makes it even more pertinent to have conversations about how this story, *The Bus Ride*, may fit in the Jim Crow south's historical context (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

These studies (DeNicola and Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012) highlight the essential nature of engaging in conversations to promote students becoming critical citizens, which is a central objective of the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS).

Negative Impacts

While there is overwhelming evidence that engaging in conversations about race and racism is beneficial for students (Brown & Brown, 2011; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011)

there is, conversely, a negative impact on avoiding those discussions. For example, according to Sue (2016):

> First, it has been shown that honest race talk is one of the most powerful means to dispel stereotypes and biases....The inability of teachers…to facilitate a successful dialogue on race has significant consequences for persons of color being because unheard and silenced (a) assails their mental health (b) creates a hostile and invalidating campus…., (c) perpetuates stereotype threat, (d) creates physical health problems, (e) saturates that broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities, (f) lowers classroom…productivity and problem-solving abilities. (p.xii-xiii)

This behavior, or lack of engagement, marginalizes the experiences of Students of Color by decentering those experiences or eliminating them with a "hidden curriculum of whiteness" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 144), which is one reason counter-narratives are critical (Leonardo, 2013).

Suppose conversations about race and racism do not occur? In that case, the absence recreates the idea that the experiences of People of Color are not of value, once again, leaving a permanent mark that affects students of all colors. These conversations must happen early in a student's schooling (Copenhaver, 2000). Bell (2004) illustrates the importance of focusing on elementary schools, citing Justice Chief Warren "to separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their age generates a feeling of inferiority…in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (p. 17). While Justice Warren was referring to school segregation at the time of *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), the

discussion could apply to how educators reproduce feelings of inferiority via the content taught, or not taught, in elementary schools.

When discussing the detrimental impacts of not having these conversations on a societal level, Sue (2016) pointed out that white Americans will fail to gain awareness and empathy and continue to have distorted perceptions of the world. Also, not having these conversations is detrimental to Students of Color in many ways, such as impacting their mental health and contributing to the overall devaluation and silencing of People of Color already present in society (Sue, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review addressed how controversial issues, specifically race and racism, are present but not consistently addressed in elementary classrooms. The five themes that were identified in the literature include teacher fear of controversy, age-appropriateness, safe environments for students, meaningful discussions for students, and the consequences of avoiding critical conversations. These themes are significant in that they point to teachers' negative feelings and the positive impact such conversations can have on students' growth. Despite teachers' reported feelings of hesitation and uncertainty, students benefit from these discussions.

Using a Critical Race Theory lens provides context for discussions focused on race and racism may be challenging, but also speaks to why they are so important. In considering the tenets of interest convergence (Bell, 1992), counter-narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2014), racism as permanent (Khalifa et al., 2013), whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), and the critique of liberalism (Delgado, 1995), the value of discussions related to

race and racism for elementary children is apparent. Since educational policies, the foundation for which many decisions in education are made, rest on the ideals of white supremacy (Gillborn, 2005), it is critical that every layer that may extend this supremacy into the classroom be examined.

Teachers have consistently expressed that fear and uncertainty surrounding conversations about race and racism prevent them from engaging in authentic instruction (Bolgatz, 2005; Brown et al., 2017; Copenhaver, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kello, 2016; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Philpott et al., 2011; VanSledright, 2002). Conversely, students overwhelmingly benefit from open discussions and safe spaces regarding race and racism (Brown & Brown, 2011; Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Singleton & Hays, 2008). Seeing as there is a need for these conversations in the classroom, CRT tenets are useful for examining how teachers engage in race-related discussions in elementary classrooms. To combat the phenomenon of teachers' fear and hesitancy, either more professional development and/or a greater level of attention to discussion skills in teacher education programs are needed (Alvarez, 2018; Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Struthers, 2015).

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Discussions of race and racism in the elementary school setting are critical, especially since most of the teaching field consists of white females (Hodgkinson, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Through this study, I sought to understand how teachers perceive their own instruction around "race talk" (Alvarado, 2018, p. 7) and how they address these topics in their elementary classrooms. I also sought to understand what role their personal experiences played in their willingness to engage their students in discussions of race and racism. By understanding these perspectives, it was my goal to identify professional recommendations to promote best practices in teaching. Because this study sought to better understand teachers and place their stories within the larger context of society and school systems with respect to the discourse about race and racism, I chose a critical, narrative methodological approach (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2012; Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided a framework to examine teacher-directed classroom discussions of race and racism. As such, the research question that guided this study was: How do elementary teachers experience race and racism in their schools and classrooms?

Epistemological Perspective

Epistemology is what knowledge consists of and how it is created and communicated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). Ontology points to what constitutes reality (Crotty, 1998). The critical theory paradigm rooted in historical realism, which is the reality that has been influenced and shaped by social construction

(Guba & Lincoln, 1984; Ryan, 2018), utilizes political ideology to further frame information and challenge power structures (Scotland, 2012). Power structures are a central influence on these social constructions (Cohen et al., 2009).

My epistemology and ontology are critical to understanding and interpreting the data derived from this project, as this dissertation follows a critical theory paradigm. My epistemology is embedded in the exchanges that occur within human interactions and they are the subjectivist truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As a teacher and researcher, I know that there is always more to learn, more to know. Teachers are constantly interacting and engaging in conversations, which embed the subjectivist truth. While the truth is changing based on new understandings, people engaging in discussions and interactions create the reality and truth at that moment. These exchanges in this study took place during the interviews, and the information was analyzed from a critical perspective

Consequently, my ontology embeds itself in the idea that truth is dependent on the individual and that social, ethnic, and cultural values, to name a few, shape reality in a historical context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For this study, it was essential to take into consideration how the social structures in which we live impact us as individuals and how we view the world. For example, whether we are directly impacted by systemic racism, or indirectly impacted, this affects how we perceive the truth. The historical context frames the truth, and in this study, the focus was on race and racism. How our social, ethnic, and cultural values impact me and each participant were different in this study; our experiences framed our truth differently. As the researcher, I have not been directly victimized by the racism that exists in the United States; however, I can empathize and try

to understand to the best of my ability the truth of someone who has been personally affected by racism.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical theory centralizes social inequities, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) specifically aims to undermine white supremacy (Maisuria, 2012). Additionally, the ways in which critical theories are used to identify the embedded power structure lends itself to this type of study. CRT centers race in the analysis of data generated through interviews (Kohli, 2008). Thus, Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that due to the concept of white value, or whiteness as property, it is necessary to use "CRT…[as] an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction" (p. 9) in education. Understanding how teachers work to provide a more comprehensive perspective of situations involving race and/or racism, or lack thereof, is a valuable component of this study. It is important to understand these perspectives in an effort to provide teachers with the tools to work towards an equitable education system.

Through their work, scholars who use CRT combat the social injustices that are prevalent in society (Bell, 1995; Ladson- Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso & Solórzano, 2002). These injustices can be seen in the elementary classroom since public schools, as social institutions, mirror the broader society (Picower, 2012; Zemblyas, 2020). The purpose of this study was to better understand how teachers address issues of race and racism in elementary classrooms. Additionally, if teachers do not address race and racism, it is critical to understand why not. By creating space to discuss these questions,

educators, administrators, and researchers in the field can further understand the inequities that exist in our schools.

By utilizing CRT, researchers can provide approaches that focus on specific power dynamics. The ways in which researchers use CRT can reveal dynamics that exist within the classroom and education system as a whole (e.g., presenting complete and accurate information) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso & Solórzano, 2002). One such methodology is through critical narratives. A critical narrative methodology is a method for collecting and analyzing data that provides greater insight into how race and racism are discussed in elementary schools (Pratt & Roseik, 2021; Stavrou & Murphy, 2021). By grounding this study in CRT, I centered race and racism.

Both the data analysis and interview structure were grounded in CRT in order to understand the data generated during the interview process. Using CRT to explain inequity in education requires critiques of educational policies and practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT is also a tool to systematically analyze the education system in order to rebuild it equitably (Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso & Solórzano, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (1998) contended that whiteness is viewed as an invaluable form of property, and those who own it reap the rewards despite the constant reality of the negative impact on Children of Color in schools. Whiteness as property, the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, interest convergence, the critique of liberalism, and intersectionality, were used to analyze the data from this study. Ladson-Billings (1999) stated that the value of CRT in education "is akin to applying a new prism that may

provide a different vision to our notions of school failure for diverse (students)" (p. 215). This perspective is essential to engage in the critical examination of education.

Methodology

I used critical narrative inquiry as the methodology for this dissertation due to the connectivity of participants and broader systemic issues (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). This approach provided in-depth data about the participants and their experiences with race and racism in elementary classrooms. Narratives are stories that give insight into experiences (Doecke et al., 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). These insights can give researchers a broader "understanding [of] human existence" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.6). Narratives not only provide a greater understanding, but narrative interviews give a story that can construct a meaningful, bigger picture (Polkinghorne, 1988). Sometimes these interviews can be disjointed, so the researcher is tasked with putting the pieces together to form a whole (Polkinghorne, 1988). Events from the narrative stories come together to form themes. A narrative can also provide avenues for counter-stories (Bell, 1995; Maisuria, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Meaning is derived from narrative stories (Casey, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988). These stories are situated within the contexts of events and experiences since stories do not stand by themselves (Casey, 1995; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Casey (1995) stated, "every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker's self" (p. 213). Narrative also gives space for more unique viewpoints outside of the traditional model of education, such as the banking model, which lacks a critical perspective (Casey, 1995; Freire, 1993).

To further frame the work of narrative inquiry, Caine and colleagues (2018) argued that research should start with a focus on the participants' lived experiences rather than on policies. This is especially important to remember when integrating a social justice approach to narrative inquiry (Caine et al., 2018). If there is too much focus on policies and practice, particularly at the beginning of the narrative research, the participants' experiences will be silenced (Caine et al., 2018).

Moving towards a critical approach, critical narrative inquiry positions the participants' narratives within broader discourses, notably within social and political contexts (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). Critical reflection is an important part of deconstructing narratives to learn more about knowledge, power, and reflexivity (Hickson, 2016). By using reflexivity, the researcher becomes more aware of how their role influences the research (Hickson, 2016). Hickson (2016) compared critical narrative to baking a cake, describing how critical reflection and narrative can be used in separate, effective ways; however, when they are combined, they can form something new. Linking narrative and discourse through data analysis is part of the procedure in critical narrative research and includes a set of questions that guide the coding process (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017).

Critical Narrative Inquiry and Teachers

In efforts to include narrative inquiry within the contexts of teaching, it is important to understand how vital teachers' stories are to advancing teaching and curriculum (Casey, 1995; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Schubert & Ayers, 1992). Elbaz-Luwisch (2007) eloquently wrote, "understanding teachers requires that we pay attention

to teachers, both as individuals and as a group, listening to their voices and the stories they tell about their work and their lives" (p. 359). Thus, the researcher uses narrative to continue to transform work within educational research (Casey, 1995; Chase, 2011; Schlein, 2020), which connects to the Critical Race Theory tenet of counter storytelling (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lynn, 2002).

Narrative is a type of discourse that uses the past to give meaning to an overall picture (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2015). The researcher constructs the narrative, which is situated within the broader background of society (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2015). For teachers, narrative inquiry can lead to further understanding their experiences (Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016). The narrative can take the form of an oral or written inquiry and can be short and event-specific, or longer to include more complex histories (Chase, 2005; Kim, 2015).

Participants

In this study, I used snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) to identify participants that met the study criteria. Snowball sampling is when participants and professional contacts recommend potential participants that may be interested in the study (Parker et al., 2019). The participants provide a greater understanding of the research question (Beitin, 2012) based on their experiences teaching elementary school curricula and their self-selected racial identification. Incorporating voices from racially diverse teachers was critical to further understanding the concepts addressed in the research question. These voices were essential to a study framed in Critical Race Theory

and which employed counter-narratives. Despite my efforts through snowball sampling, I was able to recruit only one Teacher of Color.

Including the voices of People of Color [teachers in this study] as counter-storytelling is an important tenet of the CRT paradigm (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Also, being cognizant not to re-center whiteness is critical (Bergerson, 2010). In this study, using a Critical Race Theory lens helped decenter whiteness. However, the rationale for including white voices is to provide a context that will further illuminate the counter-stories, constructing an in-depth picture of the discussions of race and racism in elementary schools.

This study included three elementary [K-5] teacher participants from Tennessee. During the proposal phase of this study, Governor Bill Lee signed the law that restricts classroom discussions on race and racism, SB 0623. It was apparent that focusing on teachers in Tennessee would provide insightful and meaningful data about this type of legislation from a classroom teacher perspective. In addition, racial identity was considered in participant selection to the extent that I aimed for two participants who identify as Teachers of Color. This selection addressed the need for multiple perspectives and saturation concerns associated with narrative interviews (Beitin, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2009; Mishna, 2004). Since saturation can arguably not exist in a qualitative study involving human experiences (Kim, 2016), it was necessary to seek out participants with different racial backgrounds and experiences to gain the most in-depth perspectives possible.

Initial recruitment was conducted via email and recruitment posters. I initially contacted six professional contacts who worked with potential participants. Based on their responses, I aimed to choose four participants who are public school teachers in the state of Tennessee with no less than three years of teaching experience. Out of five potential participants selected, two disqualified themselves based on my criteria. This left three participants, one Teacher of Color and two white teachers (*See Table 3.1*). For an interview study, the number of participants can range from 2-25 (Boyd, 2001; Thomas & Pollio, 2002), but for a narrative study, less than ten participants are appropriate **(**Desperenza, 2018; Hughes, 2017).

Institutional Review Board

Per Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I provided a consent letter to each participant. The consent letter informed prospective participants of the risks, benefits, and nature of the study, as well as how the data would be used. Due to the Tennessee Senate Bill 0623 passing in May 2021, only verbal consent was collected. Tennessee Senate Bill 0623 limits the ways in which educators can discuss topics related to race and racism. A consequence of violating this law is educators could lose their teaching license. All participants met the criteria for the study, identifying as a public-school teacher in the State of Tennessee. Because of the legislation, participant concerns, and with guidance from IRB, no identifying information is provided, and I assigned each participant a pseudonym.

In a narrative study, interviews may be conducted individually or with groups with a focus on saturation (Beitin, 2012). There is debate as to exactly how or if this is

Table 3.1: Participants Narrative Summary (adapted from Stumbo, 2021)

Participant Pseudonym	Current Grade Level	Years of Experience	Education Attainment
Dorian	First Grade	13 years	Reading Specialist; currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education
Noelle	Fourth Grade	6 years	Master's Degree
Daniella	Second Grade	6 years	Ph.D. in Education

achieved. Saturation, which focuses on the depth and reach of data typically leading to no new data gained, is not usually achieved in qualitative interviews since humans are constantly evolving and perspectives are consistently shifting based on experiences (Kim, 2015). In addition to saturation, understanding differing perspectives is just as essential as the number of study participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2009).

Data Collection

For this study, I interviewed elementary school teachers to learn more about how they engage with race and racism in the classroom. The objectives of this study were to further understand the feelings and perceptions teachers have about conversations involving race and racism in the classroom. Further, this study aimed to discuss implications for policies, and offer recommendations for professional development. For this study, the narratives of three individuals who share similar criteria (elementary school teachers) and divergent characteristics/identities (ages/grades taught, background, race) were collected and analyzed. Data generated from interviews is important in that it gives meaning to people's lived experiences (Mears, 2012); and in this case, their experiences with classroom discussions on race and racism.

Interviews provided in-depth context for teachers to discuss their professional experiences (Cohen et al., 2011; Xerri, 2018). These interviews were scheduled through email and took place within a two-week time period. Due to health restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, all interactions with participants were virtual, and all communication was digital. I provided participants with the same IRB-approved guiding

interview questions. I then used the video conferencing platform's transcription function to transcribe the interviews. The transcripts were coded in several rounds to create categories and subcategories. From these categories, themes emerged to form narratives. The data generated from the transcripts were then analyzed using the CRT tenets of permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, interest convergence, whiteness as property, the critique of liberalism, and intersectionality.

Narrative Interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method for this narrative study. Semi-structured interviews provide for greater depth and understanding of the lived experiences of teachers (Seidman, 2006). This depth and understanding provided a pathway to and context for the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen et al., 2011). It is critical to understand and give meaning to people's lived experiences, and one way to do that is through interviews (Mear, 2012; Reismann, 1993). Of significance to this study was the idea that social identities, especially those intersecting with power, affect the interview process (Scotland, 2012). There are challenges that may occur when there are power differentials, which may come in the form of participants not being fully comfortable sharing their experiences. Seidman (2006) states "…researchers and participants of different racial and ethnic backgrounds face difficulties in establishing an effective interviewing relationship" (p. 99). However, the delicate nature of interviewing a person with a different background should not discourage this (Arifin, 2018; Milner, 2007). Honoring differences is key in conducting interviews and analyzing data. Participants/researchers with different racial identities

should continue to engage in the interview process, as long as the researcher is reflective of their place within the research process (Milner & Laughter, 2015).

For this study, I used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Roulston (2010) described the technique used in this study as "oral history" interviewing, specifically with a personal narrative context. This is an important perspective to consider since the goal is to gain as much data as possible from the participants' experiences. Thus, the data collection for this research project consisted of six open-ended questions (Appendix A) which allowed participants to provide information that they deemed valuable.

During the interview process, the virtual meeting (Hanna, 2012) took place in a quiet, private room. A video recorder via Zoom was set up (participants were aware of this from the consent letter). I explained the interview process and answered any questions the participant had concerning the interview or study. The participants then gave their verbal consent. I asked a total of six questions with prompts, while taking notes. If more information was needed, prompts were used to ask participants to expand on their responses. This also provided a natural flow to the interviews.

The interview itself consisted of a semi-structured format (Brown et al., 2017; Drever, 1995; Roulston, 2010), providing the researcher with more flexibility to gain information and a means to facilitate the process. This structure also allowed for a greater level of diversity, but still provided a context to compare data (Burns, 2010). I specifically focused on the questions found in Appendix A as a guide to gain more insight into the personal experiences of teachers and their conversations about race and racism in the classroom.

An article prompt was also used to facilitate further discussion from participants. The article used in the interviews was "*Schwinn: Guidance for what Tennessee teachers can and can't teach on race will come by August 1*" by Marta W. Aldrich. An example of the questions used in the interviews include: a) Tell me about an experience where race/ racism came up in your class. b) How did your students react in these situations? During the interview, I used the secured Zoom transcription service and, once the interviews were completed, I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

Narrative Analysis

For this study, the theoretical frame guided the analysis (Beitin, 2012). During data analysis, focusing on the description of the narratives and transcripts gave further insight into the research question by understanding the experiences teachers had when conversations about race and racism were discussed in the classroom. Multiple layers of coding were completed which linked transcript data by forming codes, categories, and themes (Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). I used Critical Race Theory to generate meaning from the data. The was data then used to produce narratives for each participant (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). I utilized six CRT tenets to guide my data analysis; however, three tenets were present in the date. These tenets include the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson- Billings, 2013), counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings, 2014), interest convergence (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1999), whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), the critique of liberalism (Delgado, 1995), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, narrative inquiry

and reflexive practice helped to maintain an interactive relationship with the data (Craig, 2009) and were utilized through the analysis process.

Coding

Qualitative data analysis is used to identify patterns and themes from the interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Through interpretive inquiry, which includes identifying themes and synthesizing data from InVivo and Structural coding, I gained a more critical analysis of the data. I was able to identify themes and contextualize them through a Critical Race Theory lens. As the researcher, I was able to glean meaning from the data and to present in a cohesive format. The data analysis process followed Saldana's (2015) method which includes coding, categorizing, and noting themes. The findings were presented using narrative analysis to report each participant's experience (Thomas, 2016).

Coding is not exact and is largely left up to the researcher's interpretations (Saldana, 2015). In this case, coding was completed in cycles to determine the appropriate categories and subcategories, and consequently, themes, which are the end result of coding (Saldana, 2015). The first cycle of coding was completed using In Vivo, followed by the second cycle of structural coding. In addition to In Vivo and structural coding (Saldana, 2015), I engaged in analytic memo writing to help determine the codes identified from the narrative stories (Saldana, 2015). Analytic memos assisted with reflections and better engagement with the data (Clarke, 2005; Phillips & Carr, 2007)

In Vivo Coding. In Vivo coding, also termed literal coding (Saldana, 2015), was utilized to bring meaning to the data through the CRT lens. This coding method was

important because I sought to preserve the participants' actual words and phrases, which maintained their voices and meanings (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2015). Retaining the words of the participants helped to avoid confusing and convoluted terms (Stinger, 1999). The In Vivo coding method did not require a specific number of codes, but instead was used to examine the body of data for what stood out (Charmaz, 2006). During the In Vivo coding process, I pulled repeated and similar words and phrases that appeared in the transcripts for each participant. From those words and phrases, I assigned a code that helped describe those sets of words and phrases. Next, those codes were put in categories that later became themes from the narrative data (*See Table 3.2*).

Structural Coding. Structural coding, also known as utilitarian coding, is a question-based coding method most appropriate for interviews (Saldana, 2015). The questions are taken directly from the research question, then use the question to code sections of the interview data (Saldana, 2015). This process involves coding the interviews in their entirety, initially categorizing, and examining the data for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2015). The frequency of structural coding is determined by the number of participants who reference a theme rather than how often the theme appears in the text (Namey et al., 2008). This type of coding allows the researcher to analyze and categorize the data and is also beneficial for studies involving multiple participants. For the second round of coding, I analyzed each transcript for similarities and differences. These codes were based on the research question: How do elementary teachers experience race and racism in their schools and classrooms?

Table 3.2

Sample InVivo Coding- first round (adapted from Saldana, 2015)

Participant Quote	**Codes**	**Theme**
Dorian **00:13:33.870** "those conversations I'm having with all my students and there's a time to be serious and I'm even teaching them this time to be super serious because your life could depend on it." **00:14:47.460** "I do a lot of simulations… fairness, equality, and justice are very hard for six/ seven-year olds."	-Important, life-saving conversations -Abstract concept difficult for children but can use their knowledge to understand	Valuing Children's Lived Experiences
Noelle **00:12:22.020** "I think my kids can handle pretty much anything." **00:12:25.560** "really discount children's ability to understand and empathize. Especially children in poverty situations"	-Children are able to internalize ideas and concepts. -Children have a high level of understanding	
Daniella **00:40:36.720** "truth of the realities that are happening right now, where do we draw the line?" **00:40:47.310** "We're in this state that we're in because we're trying to protect kids from understanding."	-Children are aware -Too much protection is harmful	

Trustworthiness

To develop trustworthiness with the data, I wrote analytic memos and engaged in member checking and peer review. In narrative methodology, Loh (2013) posed questions such as "How valid is this narrative approach? How valid is the analysis of the data? How valid and reliable is the collection of these stories?" (p. 2). These questions helped me address the issues associated with trustworthiness in this study.

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos served as a method to reflect upon the data, perceptions, and processes in which I engaged. These memos served as a way to engage in conversation with myself about the data (Clarke, 2005; Phillips & Carr, 2007). To better understand the data collected, analytic memos provided an opportunity for reflection of emergent themes and any issues or problems that arose (Saldana, 2015). Deep reflection is a way to think critically about the study and biases that may have influenced the findings, which can take the form of deconstructing and reconstructing assumptions (Hickson, 2016; Mason, 2002). Analyzing biases and assumptions helps the researcher to become more aware (Phillips & Carr, 2007). I wrote analytic memos in a journal during the coding process in order to reflect on the data and any biases that came up in the research process (*See Table 3.3*).

Member Checking

I conducted member checks to provide a greater level of trustworthiness (Baxter & Jacks, 2008; Candela, 2019; Loh, 203). Member checking varies, including review of the interview transcripts, focus groups, or discussing analyzed data (Brit et al., 2016). I

Table 3.3 Sample Coding and Analysis with Analytic Memos (Adapted from Stumbo, 2021)

Participant and Code	Transcript Data and Time-Stamp	Analytic Memo
Dorian "Present the facts"	00:49:38.580 "My job as an educator is to give you the information as a student."	00:49.38.580 Main focus is to give facts.
Noelle "Have students think for themselves"	00:42:08.160 "I do that, not because I'm necessarily even afraid to say my opinion, I just think it's more powerful to teach them to think. That is part of the problem in our society, right is that we've taught kids to just absorb information and regurgitate it."	00:42:08.160 Questioning strategy. Push students to think for themselves. Doesn't want to use banking model of education but push toward higher order thinking skills. Notes there is an issue with simply pushing through information without thought.
Daniella "Truth is important"	00:40:27.210 "When do we draw the line at how much we share with kids…the truth of things that have happened and the truth of the realities that are happening"	00:40:27.210 Unsure how much to share; accuracy and truth are needed .

used member checks to ensure the narratives were accurate (Brit et al., 2016). The purpose of member checking is to ensure the interview data accurately represents the participant's experience; however, it is important to note that care should be taken to ensure the process does not stress the participant (Brit et al., 2016). Participants have the most insight regarding their experiences, but caution should be taken since participants may be more inclined to slant their stories toward a more positive viewpoint (Loh, 2013).

During the member checking process, I provided participants with their narratives to review for accuracy and for transparency (Candela, 2019). Each participant was provided their own narrative to ensure their words and my interpretation of their interview were accurate. Participants had an opportunity to check for accuracy and make corrections to ensure the narratives were as complete and accurate as possible.

Peer Review/ Debriefing

Peer debriefing is defined as "…[selecting] one or more peers who serve as a guide and discuss interpretations and concerns with those colleagues" (Miles & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2010, p. 367). Peer debriefing is used to develop trustworthiness in qualitative research (Hail et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and places the focus on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Hendricks, 2006). This is a tool often used informally by teachers to share ideas that work within their classrooms (Hail et al., 2011). I engaged in peer debriefing after the coding stages with three colleagues. Each peer earned their doctorate in the past three years from the University of Tennessee's College of Education. Two peer reviewers are former teachers. The third

reviewer earned their doctorate in 2022 in the field of educational psychology with a concentration in adult learning.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, it is paramount to explore and communicate my biases, goals, and objectives (Watt, 2007). Milner (2007) suggests it is also necessary to look within to further understand how one reflects upon themselves, participants, and culture. Taking this into account, and acknowledging my identity as a white, female engaging in critical research, I understand these identities reflect the majority of elementary teachers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d). I am compelled to thoroughly and repeatedly examine my experiences, background, biases, and motives for conducting research about race and racism discussions in the classroom. Admittedly, I am apprehensive about researching race-related topics because of my identity as a white woman and, because of this, I focused my intentions on Milner's (2007) words of advice that to conduct interviews or research, one does not have to be from the same background if one is conscious and aware of the differences and sensitivities that may exist between the researcher and participants.

As discussed earlier, my white privilege plays into a specific power structure (McIntosh, 1988). I acknowledge that I am a white female, and I am aware of the power structures that exist, and historically have existed in Western culture, specifically the United States. To this end, I understand that employing Critical Race Theory might limit me personally, as I have been on the "white privilege end" of the power structure. I also acknowledge how this places me in a distinctly outside perspective. I can empathize with,

but cannot truly understand, the challenges that a Person of Color faces in the United States. If I wish to gain insights and access to experiences that are not my own, I must be willing to accept my place as an outsider. With that said, I am comfortable in diverse settings and situations and I tend to see more opportunities for learning and growth in diverse communities, which often places me as an outsider. Additionally, even though I strive to not be in a position of authority, I understand that as a doctoral student and researcher, some participants I interviewed may have been intimidated and viewed my education as a position of power. Finally, I am not only the interviewer; I also consider myself a colleague to my participants. I am an elementary education teacher with 15 years of classroom experience. For these reasons, it was important that I consistently revisited how my positionality and experiences influenced my research.

I consider myself a native Tennessean, but also consider Los Angeles, California home; a place I lived for 13 years and where my two children were born. I currently reside in Atlanta, Georgia. Despite being born and raised in a mid-sized city in East Tennessee, I gravitate towards large, urban cities. This dichotomy has shaped my identity dramatically. My formal teacher training occurred in a predominantly white university, but my career began in Los Angeles and continued there for 13 years. As a white, female teacher I experienced a substantial learning curve as to how to teach children from diverse backgrounds, in a setting that was very different from where I had lived for most of my life. Thus, I diligently practiced self-reflection to ensure that the research process was as unbiased as possible.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the critical narrative inquiry methodology. I also presented the research question that guided the study and discussed the context, participants, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness and my reflexivity. Data collection included semi- structured interviews. Data analysis included In Vivo and structural coding. Analytic memos, member checking, and peer debriefing were all part of ensuring trustworthiness. In Chapter Four, I present the participants' narratives.

CHAPTER 4
PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES PROFILES

Introduction

This study sought to further understand and advance the conversations on race and racism in the elementary classroom. To achieve this goal, I interviewed and collected data from three elementary public-school teachers in Tennessee during the 2021-2022 school year. In this chapter I present narrative profiles of each participant, utilizing narratives from the participants interviews to illuminate their experiences. These narrative profiles depict the complexity of the topic of this dissertation.

Dorian

Dorian is an African American male who taught first grade at the time of his interview, although he has also taught third and fifth grades. His teaching background includes thirteen years of both suburban and inner-city experiences all within the same district. He is currently working towards his Ph.D. in education, in addition to holding a master's degree and reading specialist credentials.

Perspectives on Race and Racism in Education

At his current suburban school, Dorian was hired as a third-grade teacher, then moved to fifth to make a positive impact, specifically with boys. However, later, he was moved to first grade, to assist in addressing these issues earlier. When Dorian spoke of his experience in a fifth-grade classroom, he noted that it was apparent the students had just been "handed off" rather than taught throughout their elementary school years. He stated:

> By the time I was in fifth [grade]… I could see the students… and it's sad…I could see who they had in third and see how they were handed off to someone… There was really no evidence that they had even been in school for the last two and half years, sadly, because the teachers weren't teaching to every child…That's why I am back in first [grade] now because I don't want to hand them off, I want to teach them how to do school.

Dorian also noted how the increase in inner-city students at his suburban school seemed to contribute to the decrease in test scores. He attributed this to the fact that not every teacher teaches every child. Some children, Dorian observed, were pushed aside if they were on the lower end of the academic scale:

> We take a lot of kids from [the] inner-city because there's no diversity out here. Right, so they bus our diversity in which causes the scores to kind of go down because teachers aren't teaching to our students. Our school 10 years ago was like 80/20… So, it's changing, but the teacher population isn't changing. All two of our minority (sic) teachers have retired and they weren't replaced with minority teachers.

Dorian attributes his move to a first-grade classroom to a related issue–early intervention for children with behavior issues. Dorian believes he was moved to the earlier grade to help ensure children were taught how to "do school," rather than simply "tolerated." He recalls out of his seven students that require extra support, six are Children of Color, an overrepresentation based on the school demographics.

Dorian believes that professional development might help teachers who are not employing inclusive teaching practices. He noted there was one training offered, but unfortunately, it failed. The training was poorly received by the teachers in the district, was canceled, and has not been offered by the school or district again. He also noted that, historically, the administration is reactive rather than proactive regarding policies and he does not believe they will offer any further training as a result:

> It was shut down after that one class. The idea has never been revisited again and it's very much needed. But it's not going to happen. It's not going to happen under my current administration. They are not going to be proactive and seek these opportunities. They're not.

These administrative actions have a simple explanation according to Dorian. He states, "I think [my district] is extremely racist. I believe a lot of the administrators are racist and they're operating under the racist systems to continue the racism." This not only impacts the lack of cultural competency professional, but also affects Dorian's ability to advance at his current school. Despite pursuing a doctoral degree, the administration has overlooked him for promotional opportunities. He has offered several ideas that could help resolve issues the school is facing, but still, he says his professional opinions are disregarded. He does not get the leadership opportunities to enact them. Conformity is rewarded at his current school, and it is not something he is willing to do:

> They have failed to recognize my gifts and talents. They would rather me conform, the way that I teach to how another teacher teaches, rather than teach to

> my strengths…the thing that got me hired for that job does not give me an advantage. It's a disadvantage.

As such, Dorian says he will eventually return to an inner-city school where he feels more valued and utilized:

> …I'm going back to the inner-city. Didn't let me do my job out here in Pleasantville…I'm not being used in the capacity that my students need me, of the school needs. Yeah, so I'm going back… I'm being wasted out here.

The irony is that all the reasons that he was told he was hired at his current school– particularly demanding high expectations and behavior management– are now frowned upon under the current administration.

Dorian shared that he has experienced racism himself throughout his time working in the district. First, several rounds of interviews were conducted when he applied for a job at his current school, which is an unusual practice for a teaching position in the district. He said it felt even more unusual because the grade-level teachers had already expressed their approval to Dorian and told him they wanted him to be on their grade-level team. These future colleagues expressed their confusion with the additional interviews because, "[the teachers] were like 'We knew we're going to have you. I don't know why the [assistant principal] made you have all these additional interviews.'" Dorian describes a "jumping through hoops" process that included an extended interview and an unusual number of observations as a "new" teacher, leaving him feeling bullied. Despite the efforts of one administrator who tried to recruit more Teachers of Color prior to her departure from the school, there currently are very few Teachers of Color at the

school. As Teachers of Color left, they were not replaced with Teachers of Color. Dorian and the school nurse are the only two Black staff members in the school. This negatively impacts the school since there are around 300 Students of Color.

Because of the covert racism and distrust at his current school, he feels strongly about returning to an inner-city school. In his former inner-city school, he felt the teachers were trusted. They were trusted to collaborate and share resources to try to reach every student. He notes that in an inner-city school, diversity is valued. He reflected on the fact that at his former inner-city school grade-levels were consistently collaborating, even going so far as to have PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings in the hallways:

> It's a viable inner-city revival, because it's like-minded teachers, all in the trenches together to make change. I mean PLC are going on in the hallway; talking to other teachers about how to best reach this child and what works. It's like kind of like a melting pot, whereas out here, we're isolated.

At Dorian's current school, the teachers are "discouraged… [from] sharing resources, sharing stories, and talking, and collaborating… They want collaboration to stay at the grade level… it's a failing approach." To further illustrate this, Dorian stated:

> They're going to lose me, all my knowledge… all my experience to an inner-city school… because they have failed to recognize my gifts and talent. [They] would rather me conform; the way I teach to how another teacher teaches rather than teach to my strength… they don't really value my authenticity.

Additionally, Dorian indicated that he has to pretend his ideas are someone else's:

> I've actually had to dumb myself down… here's how you combat that; you have to make your ideas seem like they're their ideas…How much energy that takes? You know, rather than just saying the solution… And then I have to say "It's a great idea" and I have to sit there as though I'm genuine about it. [I] had the same idea two, three years ago.

Despite having so much to offer, Dorian explained his feelings of not being used to his fullest potential, but recognized his hands are tied until his administration sees it.

When Dorian spoke about the racism he experienced at his local school, he also spoke about the racism he encounters while combatting the white narrative and Eurocentrism. Being African American, Dorian gave insight about how he countered Eurocentrism, or whitewashing, in the school's curriculum as a cultural insider. Dorian shared:

> This curriculum that we just paid millions of dollars for…is a scripted curriculum like they realistically want everybody to walk around… and read, word for word. They don't trust educators anymore; there's no trust. And when the trust is gone, the system fails. And that's what we're saying here; that's what we're saying-what CRT [Critical Race Theory] [is] a lack of trust, on behalf of educators. So, the system is failing, or from our side, the system is failing, but from their side, the system is doing exactly what it was designed [to do].

When discussing Tennessee's SB 0623, the bill that restricts how race and racism is discussed in public K-12 schools, Dorian acknowledged the issues associated with having politics in education, such as penalizing schools for political gain. He mentioned

the damages that withholding funding can do and suggested that clinging to these political ideals that are attached to legislation brings more harm than good to schools that are already underfunded. Dorian said this contributes to a lack of trust, along with the micromanaging of teachers, new legislation, and scripted curriculum that all indicate "we don't trust you." Dorian simply responded, "they don't trust educators anymore…and when the trust isn't there, the system fails." Dorian stated this lack of trust is also visible at the district level, and indicated that if he had an administrator who trusted him and acted in teachers' interests, instead of adding more problems to already overloaded teachers, he would "run through a brick wall" for them. Dorian described the lack of trust:

> There is an overall feeling of we don't trust you to do the job that we've hired you to do, so we're going to micromanage you and tell you what to say; we're going to tell you what to think…

He echoed this sentiment in his critique of SB 0623. Dorian commented this bill alone would have left him angry and wanting to leave the profession before his current graduate-level courses. However, with a renewed perspective found in his doctoral courses, he instead wants to fight the system from within. He also believes Tennessee's SB 0623 is withholding facts. Dorian said, "The people who do not know or understand our history are destined to repeat it. And what this article [the article used as an interview prompt] is suggesting is withholding the facts."

Dorian felt strongly that it is the teacher's job to provide the factual information, and let students form their own opinions. According to Dorian, students are free-thinkers,

but proponents of SB 0623 and advocates for the ban on CRT want to diminish that and replace it with students who conform. So, when atrocities like slavery and fascism happen again, there is no "point of reference" to understand what has happened in the past:

> My job as an educator is to give you the information as a student. You can paint your own canvas. I don't put my bias. I don't put my feelings, how I feel, how I think, what I teach my kids… give them the facts and children are great judges of character…Students are becoming free-thinkers, now they are. They have this ability to make decisions and to see racism as what it is and to see slavery as what it was, and they don't want to continue those systems of oppression…

This aligns with Dorian's feeling that his district and administrators are operating under a system, which he notes, "is working exactly how it is supposed to." According to Dorian, the system is not failing, it is doing what it was designed to do, that is, elevate some, while oppressing others.

Classroom Discussions

Dorian does not shy away from discussing issues related to race or racism in the classroom. One example is that Dorian always celebrates Black History Month with his classes, but there are no other teachers or administrators in his building who do the same. They applaud his effort, but that is as far as it goes. He noted that last year the school started reading short biographies over the announcements in the morning. Prior to Covid-19, speakers were invited to his grade level to lead conversations about Black History.

However, he does not recall Black History Month mentioned at his current school. While he continues to celebrate in his classroom, he stated that it is not school-wide.

> I am African American so I have always, always, always celebrated Black History Month. In inner-city, it's celebrated. There's Black History parades; there's Black History programs; there's speakers brought in. Where I am now, it's not even mentioned…I have to remind my administration that Black History Month is coming. And last year, they started reading bios over the morning announcements…but yeah prior, there was absolutely no attempt to celebrate Black History Month, so I celebrate it. And I teach my kids…But then I started looking around my class and I was like, there are other minorities (sic) in here that we aren't celebrating. I can't celebrate one in good faith and not celebrate all… And I have to…be really careful of how I do it. If I teach it, [it's] all inclusive. Then that's my way of combating [the anti-] CRT [legislation]. If I tell everybody's history, I'm not singling out just one particular race.

He is convinced that there will not be any structural changes that will lead to a different approach in conducting these conversations.

When engaging in discussions of race and racism, Dorian uses his classroom space to cultivate conversations on topics like Black Lives Matter. He feels that it is important to have these discussions with all students because conversations about race are not only applicable to Students of Color. During these discussions, he emphasizes the seriousness of having honest talks on racism, saying, "their life could depend on it." With the entire student body in mind, he also stated how in society, people do not live in an

isolated classroom and that it is vital to learn about other cultures and how to interact with each other:

> I'm having conversations around Black Lives Matter issues with not just my Children of Color, but all my students, because the dynamic could change. If race and race relations continue to happen the way it's evolving and happening, the minority (sic) is eventually going to be the majority and there's a good chance that white people can be the minority. The pendulum can shift and it's looking like it's going to shift in your lifetime and you're going to be alive when it's us. So those are the conversations that I'm having with all my students…

To bring these serious topics involving racism and inequality into the classroom in ways that even his youngest students can understand, Dorian also uses simulations to start discussions He gave an example of a time when he taped lollipops under the seats of random children:

> I do a lot of simulations…Fairness, equality, and justice are very hard for six- and seven- year-olds. So, in the past I've done things like tape suckers under random seats in the classroom. And when they come back in the room, [I] say, "some of you have a treat underneath your seat and others of you don't." And so, they'll look under there, see a couple people will pull them out and there's no rhyme or reason for how to do it…[it's] random, girl/random boy/ race… Random selection, just random selection.

Dorian continues to explain how he uses these simulations to have a dialogue with his first-graders:

> And I have these conversations and that's what I use to start these conversations– "Now why do you think I selected the students? Do you think [it] was because of behavior? Well, okay, three of them you could say it was behavior related. They earned this because [of] behavior but what about this one? He's already had to clip down twice this morning. Is he deserving?"

Once he has asked the questions, he connects the activity to broader issues;

> Is it fair? Look at it in the eyes of justice. Is it even? So, we have conversations about that. And then I end up giving them all the same reward so that we can speak about it because it's difficult…Well, you heard these little six, seven [year-olds], they are set down, they are frowny…oh they can't stand you…But once you reward them all, then the information starts to flow and we can start having [a] dialogue. Then, if you could randomly put suckers under chairs, whose chair would you put it on and what criteria would you base it off of other than behavior. And then you know, sometimes life does this, and this is called privilege, and this is called [a] lack of privilege and there are a lot of doors that this student is going to be able to walk in that you won't have the opportunity to walk in unless you are two times better, two times smarter, two times faster.

Dorian creates situations that are accessible and appropriate for his students. By using these simulations, students can more easily understand the concepts Dorian presents.

Dorian deeply cares about his students, which is apparent in his actions to reach all of his students. He is a passionate teacher with a lot of experience. His frustrations with his current school and the education system as a whole, fuel his passion for change.

Noelle

Noelle is a white, fourth grade, female teacher at a rural Title I school in Tennessee. She holds a master's degree in education. Her educational background lies in serving rural communities. She has been in the elementary classroom for six years, three years in fourth grade and three in second grade. The nearly all-white community in which Noelle works is drastically different from the diverse environments in which she grew up. Noelle is an avid supporter of social justice by volunteering and advocating for all students.

Perspectives on Race and Racism in Education

Noelle shared her perspectives on education, specifically that teachers are not being treated like professionals by politicians when it comes to what is taught or discussed in the classroom. She said that when it comes to the critique of teachers, a lot of it is "political posturing." Noelle specifically remembered when a woman was upset at the content teachers would teach.

> Well, it's actually in the Tennessee State Standards…You are absolutely able to access those. They're public knowledge and you're able to look at them… anybody can look up the state standards and I don't know why anybody would be afraid…it's like they're afraid of it being applied to modern times and not wanting to acknowledge that.

However, Noelle explained that the kids are aware of current events, noting that even when the Black Lives Matter marches and the riots on the U. S. Capitol occurred, her

students brought those events into her classroom and talked about them through their lenses.

Noelle said that her community is slowly shifting, describing a transition from all-white to the inclusion of a few Families of Color. She also had an English Language Learner student for the first time in her class since beginning teaching in this community. Noelle is excited about this change, especially because she received her ESL (English as a Second Language) endorsement and is only just beginning to be able to utilize it:

> We are getting more [People of Color]. Like now, I have a student who's an English Language Learner for the first time…which is wild because I got my endorsement…but there's been a gradual desegregation and I don't want to call it still segregated because it's not legally segregated, but there is a kind of social or cultural split.

In Noelle's current community, the historical segregation between her community and neighboring communities is different. Some neighboring communities were desegregated sooner by federal order, so the dynamic differed. This created pockets in the area where diversity began to thrive, while others remained lastingly socially segregated. Noelle said the demographics appear to have an impact on the students in her classroom. She said that students sometimes struggle to understand the differences in countries and cultures, stating that "there's no concept that like there's different countries… Geography has been cut out [of the Tennessee State Standards] a lot [and] has impacted that as well." On the other hand, according to Noelle, the Language Arts scripted curriculum that her school uses makes an attempt at having more representation than just a white perspective.

There is even an entire module that consists of understanding differing perspectives. Noelle also includes additional texts that provide more of a worldview that may not be included in the scripted curriculum, including texts by Jaqueline Woodson, the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.

When considering the more recent news of the passing of Tennessee's SB 0623, Noelle was not concerned that she was doing anything illegal in her classroom according to the legislation. Noelle acknowledged that the current climate in education is extremely intense. She discussed the current climate as it relates to her professional practice:

> Some of the things happening there…like groups that are really trying to kind of combat [Wit and Wisdom curriculum] saying it's inappropriate, that it's like teaching Critical Race Theory…I'm like it's so propaganda and like fearmongering…The book that they cited for fourth grade I teach, *George vs. George*, which is a critical look of George Washington versus King George III. And the page they cite that we read to kids we don't even read…we don't read that page because it is probably above what a fourth grader would need to know to understand the depth of knowledge we need them to have in fourth grade.

While she acknowledged that this particular group in Tennessee is fearmongering and using propaganda (since what the group cites as 'problematic' is not even read in the curriculum), it creates tension in the overall education atmosphere in Tennessee. The decision to leave out the section of the text in question was due to the fact that it was too advanced for the age group.

Despite these hurdles, Noelle referred to her solid educational training and pedagogy as a way to combat these bouts of misinformation. Not only is Noelle well-versed in what is included in SB 0623, but she also reiterated that she presents the facts and lets the students form their own opinions, guided through questions which promote critical thinking. Noelle noted:

> Not because I'm necessarily even afraid to say my opinion. I just think it's more powerful to teach them to think. That it is part of the problem in our society, is that we've taught kids to just absorb information and regurgitate it.

She does not want her students to regurgitate and it is Noelle's hope that her students will be even stronger, more critical thinkers than her.

Noelle shared her overall perspectives about Critical Race Theory and its role in education. Noelle knows she does not explicitly teach the outlawed concepts in SB 0623, and explained that after she took time to read the bill, she was confident.

> I don't teach Critical Race Theory as it's outlined and what the commissioner did eventually put out, and I was very careful to read over that because I wanted to protect myself legally and I wanted to use my voice in ways when I disagree with what's happening, so I teach history, I teach what actually happened. I'm not afraid of that because that's my job.

Noelle added she is not legally obligated to stop discussions amongst the students, which is a key understanding that not only protects herself, but also provides her students with a space to become critical thinkers. Being a social studies and language arts teacher, content areas in which she says these topics typically are brought up more frequently, she

is not afraid to teach history, social studies, and the truth. Since the passing of SB 0623, Noelle is even more active in discussing the goal of public education.

> I'm not doing anything illegal when I teach social studies. I'm not scared of it, and I know other people don't really feel that way… I mean it makes me think of things like banned books and, in general, like controlling what [is] said to our kids; what's the goal of public education and that's kind of like something we all have to be active. I feel very active right now and, like my voice in public…I signed up just like I served on the council that's doing the TCAP passage, like picking the passages and I'm just, I think there's ways to still teach history and be honest about what has happened to people without being in legal trouble…

Noelle pointed out that "Sometimes teachers are the only ones that are really held accountable for following that law."

> I'm not legally obligated to stop my students from discussing things. I'm legally obligated of like what I'm directly teaching and so like things like with Williamson County group being upset about the books and a lot of the other books like one of the books that they don't like it's because it says that white people wouldn't let another minority group eat at the same restaurant. That happened so I'm not going to shy away from teaching history. It really doesn't intimidate me… I'm not doing anything illegal when I teach social studies. I'm not scared of it, and I know other people don't really feel that way.

Despite the feelings of distrust, Noelle is still committed to doing what is best for her students, while not violating the new legislation. However, Noelle acknowledged that

following the protocols in SB 0623 may be more challenging at the high school level since the content is more advanced and students are more aware of current events. Teaching the facts from history and having students think for themselves is essential at all grade levels, beginning in elementary school. If Critical Race Theory comes up, then it comes up. But Noelle does not feel threatened by SB 0623 because she is confident that what they are teaching in the classroom does not violate that legislation.

Classroom Discussions

Noelle described how race and racism are discussed in her classroom and said that it had always been her inclination to attack race and racism head-on; however, she also admitted that very early in her career, she was not one hundred percent sure exactly how to deal with these conversations. Noelle provided two related anecdotes that occurred in her first year of teaching and reflected on how those circumstances pushed her to grow as an educator when addressing issues of race. First, she mentioned the time a child stated that they were glad Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for equality because now their Black classmates are allowed to be in the same classroom. This caused her to think,

> Okay, I'm gonna pause and think about how to address this because I don't want to make the students who are mentioned uncomfortable. But I also want to acknowledge that that was said. I don't want to ignore it, and just be like well they didn't mean anything by that.

This moment propelled Noelle to think about the Student of Color referenced in this example and how to give this student space without causing further harm. Focusing on

the student's culture and background and allowing them to share this in a positive space away from the negative comments was how Noelle handled that situation.

Another example arose when a white student made an emotionally and racially charged comment in class, sharing that a family member said Black people were not as attractive as white people. This comment pushed Noelle to think about how a Person of Color would have liked this addressed when they were in school.

> I felt much more empowered now, and so I was like I'm glad that I've done the work to try to figure out how to deal with these situations… I gave the student who was harmed, I gave him the opportunity. I said, 'If you ever would like to talk about your culture ever and not relate it to this event, but like let people know about who you are and where you're from…' and I said,' I think that your [family member] is beautiful.' And I tried to list some things that I knew were true about the family.

Through all these experiences, Noelle noted two things she has found helpful. She said that picture books and rephrasing into words that her students can process are critical. When Noelle reads Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham jail, she noted how important it is to present content in a way that gives her students the chance to ask questions. She said, "Letting students lead the conversation… answering questions, asking questions "are essential when treading into discussions that are considered Critical.

> I do think some of the resources I've tried to pull in… listening to People of Color and educating myself knowing it's no one else's responsibility to educate me and then trying to really work on my language and my biases,

This has helped her grow in her practice as a teacher. Noelle stated her belief that having voices and experiences heard is not political, but about human rights. All of her students deserve to have their voices heard.

Since Noelle is allowed to bring additional resources into her classroom, she purposely chooses books to represent many diverse characters (e.g., racially, culturally, and economically). For example, she chose a text, *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Malala Yousafzai, in which the main character wears a headscarf. This prompted a conversation in her classroom.

> That was a natural way to have a conversation and one of the kids, like in fourth grade are very cautious about being racist, so like they'll say stuff like 'that's racist' and I said 'well, I think it could be racist because it's not anybody's job to explain to you why they're wearing something. About how the responsibility is not on the person to explain their background/race/lifestyle/culture, but it is on us (cultural outsiders) to research and do their homework….' I want my classroom to be a place where students can ask questions, but they learn to be respectful when exploring their curiosities.

In keeping with the idea that a "windows and mirrors approach" is an effective teaching technique, Noelle referenced Bishop's (1990) approach to representation.

> I try to have books. I think of it as a windows and mirrors approach because my students are [98%] white...A lot of my kids have representation in our books that like you get to see a mirror of yourself and something we like you're going to see someone who has a complexion like you…or an experience like you…and that's why I chose like *The Day You Begin* is the first book I read and we just talked about differences.

Additionally, Noelle pulls in *The Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander, which specifically mentions Black Lives Matter and slavery, but she uses the text in the poetry module because of their poetic significance.

> That book directly mentioned things like Black Lives Matter and it talks about like slavery and stuff, but it's poetry and so like I'm able to put it in there and the poetry unit and talk about the feeling that it gets and that's a supplemental text.

This is one way she integrates diverse texts while still adhering to the curriculum and state standards.

Another way that Noelle integrates resources in her classroom is using sites such as *Epic*, an online library that provides teachers access to additional texts. Having access to this online subscription creates an opportunity for Noelle to immediately pull digital books that reflect issues going on in their classroom. For example, Noelle explained that once, during school lunch, students made comments about a classmate's lunch "smelling bad." The classmate had a different cultural background than the majority of the students in Noelle's class, so Noelle pulled resources in to help students navigate these conversations. Noelle also mentioned how she is conscious of, and intentionally uses,

classroom language to combat Eurocentrism and white supremacy. For example, she mentioned speaking about "enslaved people" versus "slaves" and emphasized how much language matters.

In addition to providing alternative literature and using language intentionally to combat Eurocentric narratives, she also discussed the atrocities such as slavery and the incredible achievements of the Black community. She emphasized that many Communities of Color contribute(d) to making this country what it is today.

Another way Noelle continues to push back against the dominant narrative is by taking out misleading texts or giving inaccurate perspectives of history. Noelle said,

> I don't read *George Washington's Teeth* anymore, which used to be a really funny book to read with kids because that is a kind of Euro-washed version of events that just doesn't tell the Black person's story. And in that situation, I don't know, there are small things that you can change without having to directly combat the parents.

This picture book describes George Washington's false teeth, but does not address the dehumanizing treatment of People of Color, whose teeth were used to make George Washington's dentures.

Noelle noted that conversations about race and racism typically come up in Social Studies, which they teach along with Language Arts:

> We sometimes are really focused on teaching the history of it and less focus on the fact that, like these are things that kids are still trying to figure out and if we skate around it and don't give them the opportunity to discuss and think, they

> don’t learn and then go into adults that don’t know how to interact with people who are different.

She said that there is a certain amount of hesitancy among adults discussing race and racism in the younger grades as opposed to high school-age students due to the idea that young kids cannot handle such issues.

As Noelle said, we underestimate the students; they can handle these conversations.

> I think my kids can handle pretty much anything… and [in] my time teaching, I've watched kids go through the biggest, like some of the most atrocious horrible things that have happened [in] the world they've personally lived, and so I think we sometimes really discount children's ability to understand and empathize, especially children in poverty situations and things like that; like these kids can understand what it feels like for the world to not be…

Noelle feels strongly that students can handle these conversations and can think critically about the topic. To get her students to think critically, Noelle uses age-appropriate primary sources. For example, what she would teach in fourth grade would not be appropriate in second grade. To help Noelle determine this, specifically regarding race, she turns toward People of Color and reads about their experiences and how they would like situations regarding race and racism to be handled. Noelle named a few that she follows on social media that offer insights and recommendations into addressing topics in the classroom related to race and racism.

Noelle pointed out that it is more challenging to navigate these conversations given the environment in which she works: a rural, primarily white community with a history of violence against People of Color. "Daunting" is the word she used to describe fighting against the historical racism in the community. Historically, there was anger directed at desegregated schools, and bringing equality into the community has not been easy; however, this does not deter Noelle. She recognized that the challenges may be more significant than in an area with a more diverse population. Noelle said that despite the history of the community, good conversations have arisen amongst the children. It is important not to "project our discomfort" onto the children, which reflects a strength of Noelle's teaching, her questioning—allowing students to have space to question and think critically.

> Part of the problem in our society right is that we've taught kids to just absorb information and regurgitate it. And I don't need them to regurgitate what I think. I hope they're all better than I am. I hope that they all grow up and have broader, more informed… lens that they view the world.

Noelle thinks that, overall, the students are not too young for conversations about race and that to believe so makes society "ignorant to who the students are." She said that her "Black students know that they are Black" and should have their experiences honored just as society has historically observed white experiences, and it should not be discounted because it makes white people uncomfortable. This is a disservice to Students of Color and robs white students of the opportunity to empathize. Clearly, Noelle is a

teacher who grounds herself in both her knowledge of best teaching practices and her desire to be inclusive of all students.

Daniella

Daniella is a white, female teacher in a second-grade class. Her background in education includes teaching in both urban and rural communities, with most of her 6-year career in the second-grade classroom in Tennessee. Daniella also holds a doctoral degree in education. Her passion, as well as her expertise, lies in literacy studies.

Perspectives on Race and Racism in Education

When discussing Tennessee's SB 0623, Daniella focused on the nuances of the bill itself, for example, the overall themes of white fragility and sensitivity. Daniella had heard of SB 0623, but did not give too much thought since her school administration did not explicitly mention it. She felt that the whole policy and ban "oozes of white supremacy" and stated "heaven forbid we hurt white people's feelings." The bill, which prohibits concepts related to Critical Race Theory from being taught in the classroom, includes an extensive list of concepts which teachers cannot discuss in public K-12 schools. She included that most people do not know what Critical Race Theory is, and teachers do not teach it in second grade. Daniella's frustration with the bill was clear.

Daniella talked about how this ban will negatively impact the classroom. To comply completely, she admitted that she needs to think more about the words she uses. She recalled a time she utilized Brain Pop videos:

> That week I used Brain Pop videos, and again I have something to back me up and I felt like Brain Pop is very good about not glossing over it all completely and

> just being like… here's what actually happened. The first Thanksgiving was not rainbows and butterflies. Like there's so much more to it. And so, I used that Brain Pop [video] to kind of springboard into a discussion that I'm not sure Ms. Schwinn [Tennessee's Secretary of Education] would have been happy with…

Brain Pop, which includes short videos used to explain academic concepts, is a tool used to engage children. These tools help aid in conversations, specifically in Noelle's case about the fact the first Thanksgiving was not a happy event for Native Americans. She feels that those in charge of the implementation of SB 0623 would not have been happy about her choice to teach using the Brain Pop video.

Despite her honest approach to curriculum, Daniella noted that she is too "safe" when it comes to discussing race and racism. She expressed wanting to say so much more to her second graders, but she is unsure where to draw the line and how much to say. When discussing a text about the violence and racism that Jackie Robinson experienced, she would say, "People just used to make bad decisions… In those moments, I would be like, `I want to say more.'" The introduction of SB 0623 only compounds the problem.

When considering Tennessee's SB 0623, Daniella made the connection that it is because of the legislation that she is required to send home lists naming every book she *might* use in class. She finds it disturbing to know how many people misunderstand Critical Race Theory; conversely, she offered the idea that perhaps they understand more than that, which is another way of preserving the status quo:

> I feel like it's very disturbing to know that when they're speaking of Critical Race Theory, there's so many misunderstandings, but I also feel like they understand

> what we're trying to do and that's why it's so pushed back and… they don't understand that we're not actually teaching Critical Race Theory in the elementary classroom, but they do, I feel like, understand that we're trying to kind of break this cycle of, you know, white-glazed stories and representation, and just, I feel deep down, it's all stemming from just trying to maintain that thing that's always been in place.

Before the 2021-2022 school year, she just pulled a book, sometimes at the moment, to read to the class. Now, and this is the first year Daniella has experienced this, all book titles that *could* be read from the teacher's collection must be sent home to the families. This policy hinders her ability to have more discussions about critical issues in the manner she is used to;

> I felt like a lot of the critical conversations came out like trade books that were about critical issues. And now it's almost like oh well, I need to write a note to let parents know, like I'll be reading, like I don't know it just feels different.

To comply, Daniella sends weekly newsletters home informing families of the upcoming books that might be read. Daniella questioned the true intentions of why this policy is being strictly enforced:

> They don't understand that we're not actually teaching Critical Race Theory in the elementary classroom, but they do I feel like understand that we're trying to kind of break this cycle of you know, white-glazed stories and representation, and just, I feel like they deep down know, and it's all stemming from just trying to maintain that thing that's always been in place.

The policy has made Daniella even more hesitant to bring in her professional resources. This policy has also highlighted trust issues for Daniella, with the district only focused on covering themselves in case of liability:

> My administrator was very clear about that at the beginning of the year, how she had that pressure. She was saying, like you need to be sending home, no matter what the book is, like send home a note letting [the families] know what you're reading.

Following the curriculum strictly and not being allowed to use her professional resources and judgment made Daniella uncomfortable:

> Where's this coming from and what is the true intention behind it, because, as you know I study curriculum and I see how white supremacy is enacted through the curriculum. So, to be told you can only read these books unless otherwise stated it's kinda like this, I don't know, it's really played into my comfort level of what I can share in my classroom this year.

While Daniella did say that the administrators were supportive of the teachers and even noted the pressure on them to make sure teachers were following these policies, there was a definite expectation to follow them with fidelity. Daniella indicated that it "just feels different" than her years previously teaching (in another district). Before 2021-2022 school year, this policy existed, but lacked enforcement. The district notified Daniella as a new teacher about the enforcement of the policy.

Prior to this, she had the freedom to professionally choose resources that followed the Tennessee State Standards. She was allowed to create her lesson plans and integrate

the curriculum if it followed the Tennessee State Standards. Daniella said this required procedure could be a direct result of the implementation of Tennessee's SB 0623.

Daniella said that teachers do not teach Critical Race Theory in elementary schools, which makes the implementation of SB 0623 even more perplexing. Daniella also discussed the layers of the impact of the bill that goes beyond classroom discussions. She stated the negative impact this has on Teachers of Color;

> It really is in the people who are making the decisions. They have so much control over this and it's really scary honestly to see how that could end up playing out. If it's maintained at least. So yeah, and then I think too, I think about how you know Teachers of Color are like we're [trying to get] Teachers of Color in the system, but also retaining them in the system.

There are real challenges in retaining Teachers of Color in a system that is committed to maintaining the dominant narrative that lacks the voices of People of Color. She stated that SB 0623 is "soaked in white supremacy."

When Daniella was describing her district and school, there was an important aspect that stood out when she interviewed for her current position - there was a Woman of Color on the administrative team. Daniella expressed relief knowing this, as she believed they clearly valued diversity in their hiring practices.

> Is a Woman of Color… it's not just all white ladies running this school or white people running this school…So that really helped me to feel more comfortable, at home. I might talk about race and racism in my classroom.

Despite the feelings of discomfort and frustration, Daniella viewed having cultural insiders as mentors valuable- relieving some anxiety about discussing race and racism in the classroom.

Classroom Discussions

The 2021-2022 school year was Daniella's first in her current district, as well as the first school year Tennessee's SB 0623 was implemented. Daniella's insight on how discussions on race and racism occur and how children handle those conversations mirrors her own experience and growth. Daniella said that these conversations occur when class discussions involve reading literature such as texts about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harriett Tubman:

> Harriet Tubman and people like that, and so, a lot of times any conversations about race and racism will arise out of discussions that are prompted by literature or by something that we are learning about that has to do with race and racism.

For Daniella, literature, more than anything else, appeared to prompt these discussions most. Early in her career, Daniella recalled reading a text about Jackie Robinson; the students were shocked that he had objects thrown at him because of the color of his skin.

> Whenever we were reading a book on Jackie Robinson, this would have been about five years ago, and I remember if I was reading this book, it was a children's picture book...I remember in that specific book it talked about how Jackie Robinson had things thrown at him and the reasons things were thrown at

> him while he was trying to play baseball, and that book was pretty explicit about that.

The reading of the book prompted a discussion about how society treats People of Color. This particular example occurred early in Daniella's career, before Daniella engaged in critical literacy studies. She, at the time, explained racism as surface-level analogies, such as the "M&M" scenario, which involves explaining to students that we are all the same on the inside. Even at this time in her career, Daniella expressed that she wanted to say more during these discussions, but was unsure how to do so or even how much to say, stating that she "want[ed] to say more."

As Daniella has moved through her career, she responds to these situations much differently. She is more aware of herself and how educators teach these issues. Now, Daniella is mindful not to say that those atrocities happened, but instead, they happen.

> Like this used to happen to people because of their skin color… I'm noticing now from where I was before, just as far as trying to combat Eurocentrism is just that it was just that simple, like "Yes, people *are* treated unfairly,' instead of what I used to say 'People *were* treated unfairly."

However, even with all of her education and experience, there are still moments of uncertainty about how much she is allowed to discuss and how careful she has to be with these conversations.

As Daniella re-entered the classroom from a short hiatus while she earned her doctoral degree, she noticed that practices had changed regarding teachers' freedom to read texts of their professional choices.

> ...we always had to read aloud every single day…It is my favorite classroom practice [that] I loved with all my heart… I would often let students share what book they wanted me to share that day because they loved it…Then when I got to [current county], and I learned very quickly that we are not as teachers supposed to read anything that's not within our curriculum…No matter, the trade book, it could be Mo Willems… regardless, we are supposed to send a note to parents…I have hundreds of books in my classroom library so at that moment in the beginning of the year, making the list of every single one was just, it wasn't something I could do at that moment.

Daniella discussed that even beyond conversations in the classroom there is also the issue of combatting a Eurocentric narrative. While she does not feel entirely comfortable in how successful she is at combatting a Eurocentric narrative or whitewashed viewpoints in the curriculum, she noted that the scripted curriculum they use focuses on outside voices and cultural influences. This is beneficial since the district restricts her use of outside materials; “When I got to [my district], and I learned very quickly, that we are not, as teachers, supposed to read anything that’s not within our curriculum.”

To further combat Eurocentrism and white supremacy, Daniella remarked on how she has grown in the past few years and reflected on changing her classroom to mirror her own growth as an educator and critical scholar, “I see how white supremacy is enacted through the curriculum.”

Earlier in her career, Daniella would accept any book donated to her classroom library. Now, she carefully monitors any book that includes a whitewashed perspective. That book will not be available in her library until she presents it with an alternate perspective. While Daniella works hard to make her classroom equitable. She does not feel fully confident as a white educator teaching Children of Color; “I still just feel like as a white educator teaching Black and Brown children that I still don't know what… I’m doing it.” She shared that valuing and honoring the voices of cultural insiders is essential for her. Daniella points out that outside voices (outside of the realm of Eurocentrism), are helpful when countering whitewashed narratives. At the same time, Daniella feels "incapable" of truly offering another narrative if a Person of Color's experience is not available. She remarked that she feels like "just a white lady" and cannot fully address these issues the way she should with her Students of Color. This is a repeated acknowledgment that a cultural insider's experience is imperative to dismantling a Eurocentric narrative. This is one reason she uses texts written by people who are cultural insiders, “And I still feel like I have no place in like saying anything that’s not, that I can’t have backed up within a curriculum or within a book that’s been written by a cultural insider.” These types of texts are valuable guides and can offer a perspective that Daniella may not be able to.

While utilizing the expertise of cultural insiders and her own training in critical literacy, Daniella shared that another important element to these discussions about race and racism is the language that teachers use. Language matters, and teachers' words and phrases in the classroom matter, such as “people *are* treated unfairly" as opposed to

"people *weren't* treated fairly." This is one way Daniella teaches another perspective. For example, instead of stating racism happened in the past, she uses present tense verbs to understand that racism is not over and still occurs today. Reflecting on her growth, Daniella weaves in teaching practices that she now knows offer a broader perspective. Being literacy-focused early in her career, Daniella said she accepted any book she provided for their classroom library, as many new teachers do.

> A fellow teacher, she just had leftover books that she didn't want. She had extra copies so she was just passing them down and I got a big stack of them, and used it. I would just go ahead and kind of put those things in my classroom library without looking at them. Just stamp my name in them and they would go in.

But this has changed. Daniella is acutely aware of the books that offer only a white perspective or even a perspective that is not accurate. Daniella recalled a Thanksgiving book she may have read in her first few years of teaching. However, now she would not have it in her classroom unless a critical discussion accompanied and it could be compared to another text that offered a differing perspective.

> A Thanksgiving theme written by a white author had the very traditional tale of Native Americans and pilgrims and very whitewashed, and so like before, I don't feel I would have even recognized that. And this time I was like, 'You are not going in my library at all. I'll set you to the side' so that maybe we can talk, maybe one point I'll be able to bring up like, 'This is the version I learned, which is not correct,' but I feel very like that's not an appropriate thing to do, you know, as a teacher right now.

Daniella said that she tries to be optimistic, even after recalling a cultural competency training her district conducted. The training failed and hearing many white teachers unwilling to be a part of a constructive conversation left her feeling deflated. She said she tries to be hopeful, but is aware of the uphill battle she and many other educators face.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the narrative profiles of three public-school elementary teachers in Tennessee. The participants all agreed that their students could handle challenging conversations and that these conversations are necessary. Two of the teachers, who identify as white, frequently mentioned the importance of a cultural insider's voice when navigating discussions regarding race. Valuing the experiences of a Person of Color indicated an understanding that a white person's experience was limited. Dorian, an African American teacher, wanted more teachers who are aware of the experiences of Children of Color and are able to teach all children. When discussing Tennessee's SB 0623, all participants noted how important it was to understand Critical Race Theory and what the theory entailed, while also providing students with facts and skills needed to be critical thinkers.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the narratives of each participant based on the data collected through interviews. The three participants offered unique perspectives grounded in their varying experiences. In Chapter Five, I discuss the themes I identified from the data. These themes help better understand the study topic and, in Chapter Six, I offer

possible ways to address the issue of race and racism in elementary classrooms in the climate of Tennessee SB 0623.

CHAPTER FIVE
FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to further research focused on race and racism in the elementary classroom, expressly framed within the context of current Tennessee legislation, SB 0623. This chapter is organized by discussion of findings as they relate to Critical Race Theory, as well as the themes that emerged during the analyzing and coding process. In addition, as a white female researcher who has spent five years at the University of Tennessee furthering my understanding of Critical Race Theory and critical theories in general, I include my reflexivity. In Chapter Three, I presented my positionality statement. I discussed my identities, including identifying as a white female educator who has spent 19 years in elementary education, 15 of which have been in the elementary classroom. These identities align with my study; therefore, it is essential to include reflections of my experiences as a pseudo-participant in this section (Cicek et al., 2020).

This chapter presents the key findings from three in-depth interviews with Tennessee teachers with at least three years of public education experience. The five themes that identified are:

1. *Trust/ Distrust in Teachers*
2. *The Value of Children's Lived Experiences*
3. *Importance of a Cultural Insider*
4. *Allowing Students to Think Critically*
5. *Providing Professional Development*

The findings of this qualitative study answer the research question, which asked how elementary teachers experience and address race and racism in their classrooms. These findings are critical amid the passing of SB 0623 in May 2021, restricting discussions of race and racism in Tennessee public education.

Revisiting Critical Race Theory

In this section, I use Critical Race Theory to analyze the data from the narrative interviews. The tenets often intersected. For example, what may have been discussed in an interview reflected permanence of racism and whiteness as property. The structure of this chapter includes a discussion of selected Critical Race Theory tenets, followed by analysis of the participant interview data, followed by my reflexivity statement as a pseudo-participant. I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

Permanence of Racism

The permanence of racism is the idea that racism is ingrained in society (Bell, 1992; 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson- Billings, 2013). Racism continues because it exists in our society (Bell, 1995; Lynn, 2002). This tenet manifests in institutional and structural racism which directly affects students and Communities of Color (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). Because we are in this state of permanence, Critical Race Theorists, who believe in a racial realist approach, state that true equality can never be achieved (Bell, 1995). During the interviews, Noelle did not make reference to the permanence of racism in her teaching. However, Dorian and Daniella discussed this concept.

Dorian. Dorian, an African American male, expressed several times that racism still exists in the building, district, and system in which he works. He believes he experienced this firsthand when he was denied promotions, despite his qualifications. While describing his work environment, he stated that he is not utilized and often has to dumb down his ideas, pretending that they are someone else's, to be seen and valued:

> I've actually had to dumb myself down…here's how you combat that; you have to make your ideas seem like they're their ideas…How much energy that takes? You know, rather than just saying the solution… And then I have to say "It's a great idea" and I have to sit there as though I'm genuine about it. [I] had the same idea two, three years ago.

The current hiring process also concerned Dorian. He indicated that the lack of Teachers of Color in his school suggests that racism still exists, especially since white teachers were hired to replace the Teachers of Color who left the school, "the teacher population is changing. All two of our minority [sic] teachers have retired and they weren't replaced with minority [sic] teachers."

When Dorian discussed the importance of encouraging critical thinking, he shared, "…because students are becoming free thinkers now, they have the ability to make decisions and see racism as what it is and to see slavery as what it was and they don't want to continue those systems of oppression." Dorian referenced silencing such attempts for teachers to encourage critical thinking:

> …that 30 years of students to think this way die off and we'll put this plan so that they can't give birth to other free thinkers. And this movement will die off and

> we'll go back to slavery and racism and [the] Holocaust…and we'll just pretend that it didn't happen. It happens again they have no point of reference to realize "hey did this happen somewhere else before?"

This idea that history will repeat itself if we do not teach it lends itself to the idea that there is a system in place that perpetuates racism. Legislation, like SB 0623, remove elements of knowledge and lived experiences from the classroom, especially those belonging to People of Color. By omitting those concepts, Dorian expressed concern that once you have these restrictions in place, any progress made in the realm of social justice will be diminished.

Dorian also shared that, "It's a system problem in education…education is working exactly how it's designed to work," referring to the systemic inequities that exist. He further explained that "Prior to [my professor's] class, I would be enraged. I'd be very upset. I probably would have left the profession. After [my professor's] class, understand that the best way to attack the system is from within."

Additionally, Dorian stated, "The same people that were in power 100 years ago are the same people in power now." This clearly reflects how the system of power has and continues to be maintained by the racial majority. Frustrations that the school system is not failing, but working as it was designed to work, indicates that the inequities that sustain racism are built in our social structures and are meant to continue. This is an important concept when discussing social structures, not just the education system, that have always been in place. While maintaining these racial inequities perpetuates racism; it is also important to critique, "who has the power to maintain these structures?"

Daniella. Daniella referred to the permanence of racism when she spoke about the misunderstandings of Critical Race Theory. In elementary school, Critical Race Theory is not taught. It is often taught in graduate-level courses. However, Daniella said that she thinks the people who support this type of legislation understand that there is an effort to break the cycle of racism. She said:

> They don't understand that we're not actually teaching Critical Race Theory in the elementary classroom, but they do, I feel like, understand that we're trying to kind of break this cycle of, you know, white-glazed stories and representation, and just I feel deep down, it's all stemming from just trying to maintain that thing that's always been in place.

Daniella expressed that maintaining the "white-glazed story" is the true goal of these types of restrictive bills and demonstrates that there is a continuous "cycle" which elevates one story, while oppressing another. This cycle is the perpetuation of one racial group's dominance over another racial group.

Daniella also described her thoughts as to what may be the reasons behind only being able to engage with certain books in the curriculum:

> Where's this coming from and what is the true intention behind it, because, as you know, I study curriculum and I see how white supremacy is enacted through the curriculum. So, to be told you can only read these books unless otherwise stated it's kinda like this, I don't know. It's really played into my comfort level of what I can share in my classroom this year.

With Daniella's expertise in critical literacy studies, she pointed out how white supremacy can be continued through the types of curricula used by schools and districts. When examining these actions through the permanence of racism tenet, understanding the discrepancy in school equity is critical. This discrepancy can be seen in the form of school funding, but also in creating, implementing, and maintaining curriculum. When Daniella is asked to send home a list of the books in her classroom, which takes an incredible amount of time and energy, it is another way to carefully monitor the curriculum that is in place. The "white-glazed stories" that Daniella referred to indicate that is the goal of legislation such as SB 0623. Having teachers provide lists of potentially hundreds of classroom books to parents not only creates an atmosphere of distrust and frustration, but clearly illustrates with the timing of SB 0623, the purpose of such lists.

Reflexivity. As an educator, I try to maintain hope and positivity, but it is challenging with considerable hurdles. Just as we make one inch of progress, more legislation is passed affecting the education system, making us take steps backward. While writing this dissertation, Tennessee's SB 0623 passed in May 2021 followed by Georgia's HB 1084 in May 2022, further normalizing racism in the United States. I was honestly, at first, shocked when there were so many anti-Critical Race Theory bills introduced around the country, not just in Tennessee. I recall having numerous conversations with both educators and non-educators about the credibility of these bills. My main concern is that I know that Critical Race Theory is not being taught in schools since the material is complex even for graduate students. So, my next thought was, "What is the true intention of these bills? What are they trying to curtail?" It appears that the

answer to these questions is to perpetuate the dominant narrative and reaffirm the permanence of racism.

Summary

The permanence of racism is illuminated in multiple ways through Dorian's and Daniella's narratives. The prevalence of racism at the building level was noted through continued hiring practices, affecting staff diversity. Additionally, how this tenet is observed through the implementation and monitoring of curriculum is also important. There was an overall sentiment that the issues society has been dealing with have not disappeared.

Counter-storytelling

Counter-storytelling centers narratives from individuals outside of the dominant, Euro-centric perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Within the context of education, these counter-stories are vital in providing equitable spaces and identifying/dismantling a system of white supremacy (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling in education is crucial because it voices the ideas of Teachers of Color, Students of Color, Parents of Color, Administrators of Color, and Community Members of Color, and without those voices, what is known about education is not valid (Ladson- Billings & Tate, 1995).

Dorian. Counter-storytelling was woven throughout Dorian's narrative; as an African American male, his perspectives often countered the dominant narrative. He gave an example of his observation that not all children were being taught; they were simply being tolerated.

> By the time I was in fifth… I could see the students… and it's sad…I could see who they had in third and see how they were handed off to someone… There was really no evidence that they had even been in school for the last two and half years, sadly, because the teachers weren't teaching to every child…That's why I am back in first now because I don't want to hand them off, I want to teach them how to do school…

He also discussed celebrating each of the cultures present in his class. He indicated that his school does not typically even celebrate Black History Month, but he has chosen to do so.

> There was absolutely no attempt to celebrate Black History Month, so I celebrate it. And I teach my kids… But then I started looking around my class and I was like, there are other minorities in here that we aren't celebrating.

Dorian's initiative to provide more than one narrative, whether it is understanding how to reach all children or adding more voices to his curriculum, actively gives his students more than a single story. Utilizing a colorblind ideology, which defaults to the racial majority, does not hold any benefit for People of Color as it silences their experiences (Leonardo, 2013). Whether this type of ideology appears in hiring practices or in curriculum, the importance of being inclusive of Voices and People of Color is critical.

Noelle. Noelle emphasized that it is essential for her to seek out the voices of cultural insiders as she navigates discussions focused on race and racism in her classroom. Whether this comes from direct or indirect sources such as social media, it is important that these voices and experiences guide her when engaging in conversations

that may not be rooted in her own experiences. One example she gave was reading *The Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander, since this book discusses Black Lives Matter and slavery.

> That book directly mentioned things like Black Lives Matter and it talks about like slavery and stuff, but it's poetry and so like I'm able to put it in there and the poetry unit and talk about the feeling that it gets and that's a supplemental text.

She offered additional context.

> I've tried to follow some People of Color who are teachers and hear how they talk about [race and racism] with their kids… their recommendations and I did a PD this summer about that because it is a little bit daunting sometimes to do it… especially when you know I mean [the history of this town].

Noelle shared how she refers to counter-storytelling to help her become a better educator for all children.

> I've tried to pull in listening to People of Color and educating myself knowing it's no one else's responsibility to educate me, and then trying to really work on my language and like my biases and check myself because how I present the information is usually [the students'] first exposure to history, so it's important the way that I talk about it and then also primary sources have been a big part of that. When I talk about the Tuskegee Airmen; showing clips.

When Noelle utilizes texts or supplemental materials, which is also seen in prior research (Godreau et al., 2008), she is being cognizant of which elements are lacking in the curriculum. In this case, the curriculum needs more counter-stories and perspectives,

which she provides. While there is always room to grow, Noelle is aware of what she may not be able to provide authentically and uses literature to supplement in order to give a more complete picture and perspective.

Daniella. Having the voice of a cultural insider was important for Daniella, especially regarding texts and literacy. One example she gave was when a book about the first Thanksgiving made its way into her library. She noticed a very sanitized version with no counter narratives. She decided to put it away and not read it unless it was accompanied by an alternative viewpoint.

> A Thanksgiving theme written by a white author had the very traditional tale of Native Americans and pilgrims and very whitewashed, and so like before I don't feel I would have even recognized that. And this time I was like, 'You are not going in my library at all. I'll set you to the side' so that maybe we can talk, maybe one point I'll be able to bring up like, 'This is the version I learned, which is not correct,' but I feel very like that's not an appropriate thing to do, you know as a teacher right now.

Daniella felt that she may not be the best source to give a counter-narrative. This is one reason why having authentic counter-stories is critical in her classroom. She expressed the inauthenticity that she felt as a white teacher and how that impacted her. Being a teacher who specializes in literacy, she relies on books to give her students counter-narratives. This is something that is also seen in the research (Godreau et al., 2008).

Reflexivity. As a white, female educator, I often found myself relating to the experiences of white, female participants. I, too, have often felt lost in addressing experiences that are not my own; at times, stumbling through my words trying to find the best way to teach or engage in conversations about race and racism. I have felt hesitant trying to discuss an experience that I know I cannot personally relate to, which made me feel like a disingenuous educator. During the past five years, I have become more confident. I have made a conscious effort to "do better," as Noelle would say. I have taken many steps back and listened to the experiences of People of Color, and have tried to take in what they believe is important for white people to know. At the same time, it is also important for white people to do their own work and research in this area to be better where racism exists.

Summary

Each participant emphasized the importance of counter-storytelling. Since the dominant perspective in Tennessee stems from a Eurocentric viewpoint, this could be why having counter-voices is something that each participant thought was important. Literature and teaching strategies that the participants discussed throughout the interviews reflected the need to have a cultural insider's voice present.

Whiteness as Property

The next tenet explored is "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993). This tenet refers to whiteness being used to exclude People of Color and provide unearned benefits to those who are white (Given, 2008; McIntosh, 1988). Whiteness as property is witnessed in society and education, as evidenced by the curricular exclusion of perspectives of

People of Color (Moreau, 2003). Being able to choose not to discuss race and racism is evidence of whiteness as property; at the same time, Students of Color do not get to choose whether or not they experience the direct effects of racism (DiAngelo, 2006; Miller & Harris, 2018).

Dorian. Whiteness as property appeared in Dorian's interview when discussing the system of education as a whole. The system of education is built upon the idea of advancing some, while keeping others oppressed. The individuals who experience this oppression are People of Color. Dorian described the system in the United States as working exactly as it is intended to work;

> They don't trust educators anymore; there's no trust. And when the trust is gone, the system fails… So, the system is failing or from our side, the system is failing, but from their side, the system is doing exactly what it was designed [to do].

When Dorian stated that the system is working exactly as intended, he indicated the tenet whiteness as property at work. The education system is not created for equal opportunities. The fact that property taxes fund our public education system is evident in that statement.

Dorian experienced this in his own school and district. The hiring practices, along with the lack of training in cultural competency, create a system that is less diverse and less responsive to those with diverse experiences. Being able to opt-out of training that focuses on diversity is a privilege that is evident in the tenet of whiteness as property. White teachers are not subject to the same experiences of racism as Teachers of Color. So not being required to attend trainings, or even to alter hiring practices to be

more inclusive of People of Color, is a privilege. Regarding his experiences as a Person of Color already employed, he went on to state, “I’m not asked to the table, so I can’t give this feedback… I don’t even have a seat at the table.” This is clearly a commentary on who has the power to include and exclude; who has a seat at the table. In Dorian’s case, he does not. His feedback is not seen as valued because he does not have whiteness as property.

Noelle. Whiteness as property was also evidenced by Noelle’s when she spoke about combating the Eurocentric narrative. The dominant narrative that is entwined into curricula is typically a Eurocentric one. This type of curriculum illustrates whiteness as property by using the curriculum to exclude the voices and perspectives of People of Color. Noelle did say that the curriculum she currently uses does a better job at integrating diversity. However, she still supplements with texts and trade books where she sees a gap in diverse views.

> Another way I counteract the whitewashing is making sure that, like my curriculum addresses it and I do respect the way that [my current curriculum] does a lot… I’m more ignorant with like Native stories than I would like to have been just because that wasn’t something that was prioritized growing up. And my whole last module like we don’t just learn Greek and Roman gods. We learn Native stories and we compare them and then my final character [in the text we study] is not only a woman, but a Native girl… there’s some good conversations that naturally arise from that. I also try to use my texts, like my supplemental texts.

Noelle continued to discuss how she utilizes windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990). This approach helps her fill gaps in the curriculum and teach to all students.

> And not all of my students are white but like, 98% are. A lot of my kids have representation in our books automatically so those who don't I'm going to very intentionally pull books that like you get to see a mirror of yourself and… hair like you, or an experience like you, or different culture, and different food like you and that's why I chose, like, differences.

More specifically, she talked about the book she reads on the first day of school.

> I started the year with this [*The Day You Begin*], and this has nothing to do with my curriculum… and then the diversity in the book that's one of my favorite things about Rafael Lopez as an illustrator. Like every page shows students from different backgrounds and says 'there will be times when you walk into a room and no one there is quite like you. Maybe it will be your skin, your clothes, or the curl of your hair…

When engaging in curriculum, teachers need literature and supplemental materials to teach the complete picture regarding themes related to race and racism (Godreau et. al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Considering why these materials and resources are omitted, and why teachers like Noelle need to supplement, it is critical to take into account who is charged with the task of creating and adopting curriculums in our school systems.

Daniella. Whiteness as property is entwined into this interview by reflecting on the policies and who controls the creation and implementation of those policies. In her

interview, Daniella presented her observations about enforced policies. These policies require teachers to provide families with the books that may be read throughout the year. During this interview, Daniella connected that the enforcement of this policy was due to the passing of SB 0623;

> I felt like a lot of the critical conversations came out like trade books that were about critical issues. And now it's almost like, oh well, I need to write a note to let parents know like, I'll be reading like, I don't know, it just feels different.

The content of SB 0623 outlines details that prohibit discussions based on race or sex that would make children uncomfortable. To this point, Daniella voiced that it is the white individuals that this bill is concerned about making uncomfortable. The ban "oozes of white supremacy" and "heaven forbid we hurt white people's feelings," she stated when referencing SB 0623.

Individuals use whiteness to exclude (Given, 2006). Daniella stated:

> I feel like it's very disturbing to know that when they're speaking of Critical Race Theory, there's so many misunderstandings, but I also feel like they understand what we're trying to do and that's why it's so pushed back and… they don't understand that we're not actually teaching Critical Race Theory in the elementary classroom, but they do, I feel, like understand that we're trying to kind of break this cycle of you know, white-glazed stories and representation and just, I feel deep down, it's all stemming from just trying to maintain that thing that's always been in place.

These elements Daniella intertwines in her curriculum help to de-center whiteness. Whiteness as property is seen when the exclusion of Voices of Color happens via the curriculum (Moreau, 2003). When Daniella went on to describe the purpose of bills, like SB 0623, as maintaining a system that has always been in place, she not only referred to the permanence of racism tenet, but also the whiteness as property tenet. Remembering who has the power to maintain these systems of inequality, both currently and historically, indicates whiteness as property.

Reflexivity. As a result of spending many years with my partner, Brian, an African American man, I see whiteness as property in so many parts of society, not just in education. I recall when we needed to change hotel rooms, and Brian told me that I needed to be the one to call since I had a "white voice," suggesting the hotel staff would be more likely to fulfill my request. In our school setting, Brian was often admonished for speaking up and felt that he had a target on his back at each of the places he worked. This is something that his white counterparts did not express. Whiteness as property is a privilege that I have directly observed in context with someone who did not have access to the benefits that accompany whiteness.

Summary

Whiteness as property exists where control and decision-making lie, specifically concerning what is included in curricula; as Given (2008) and McIntosh (1988) stated, it provides unearned benefits and excludes race. The curricula that are used and referenced in this study need to be supplemented to provide a range of diverse voices. Tennessee's

SB 0623 is a prominent example of how whiteness as property exists in Tennessee classrooms.

Themes

In this section I present the five themes I identified during data analysis: trust/distrust in teachers, the value of children's lived experiences, the importance of a cultural insider, allowing students to think critically, and providing professional development. These themes were identified through structural and In Vivo coding. I provide a discussion of each theme and participant narratives. Included in this section are my reflexivity and a summary.

Trust/ Distrust in Teachers

The theme of trust appeared in each interview. Trust defines how much autonomy and professionalism teachers have. Despite participants holding or seeking advanced degrees, some participants implied the lack of trust relating to teachers, while others were more direct in their statements. This idea that teachers are not seen or treated as trusted professionals permeated each interview at various moments. Whether it was regarding which conversations the class engages in or in response to SB 0623, there were many reasons the participants felt that they are not trusted to do their job.

Participants gave some specific remarks during the interviews related to trust in teachers, or lack thereof. Dorian noted that SB 0623 is "a lack of trust on behalf of educators." This specific legislation was reported by Noelle as "fear-mongering," but she did not subscribe to the fear herself. She instead researched what SB 0623 stated, but this prompted her to comment that "Sometimes the teachers are the only ones that are held

accountable for following the laws." This indicates teachers are being told what they can and cannot teach, sometimes against their professional judgment. As Dorian described, micromanaging is another way educators are discredited and not trusted to make professional judgments. Dorian specifically mentioned the negative impacts of the scripted curriculum in that they, "micromanage you and tell you what to say. We're going to tell you what… paid millions of dollars… it is a scripted curriculum."

This theme of trust/distrust of teachers came across differently in several of the interviews. However, each participant was frustrated they were not treated as educated professionals and that their opinions and recommendations did not garner respect. Dorian succinctly stated, "(people) don't trust educators anymore."

Noelle discussed the uncomfortable oversight from parents and how this can make it challenging to teach the standards. She recalled a conversation where she explained that the Tennessee State Standards are accessible for everyone and readily available. At the same time, there is this feeling of combating parents or other non-educators, while trying to do what is best in her professional opinion. When asked how she fights a Eurocentric narrative, she added that there are small things teachers can do that may not necessarily incur negative attention from parents. Using the book *Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander, Noelle took a risk because it mentioned Black Lives Matter and slavery. However, she used her professional judgment and included it in the Language Arts poetry unit. From there, she was able to have conversations about the content with her students.

> That book directly mentioned things like Black Lives Matter and it talks about like slavery and stuff, but it's poetry and so like, I'm able to put it in there and the poetry unit and talk about the feeling that it gets and that's a supplemental text.

Daniella explained that teachers must send home a list of books that they may read in class. This, according to Daniella, is a new procedure and one that she is getting used to, as she usually pulls books for an impromptu read-aloud. This contributes to issues of trust that educators experience.

> ...we always had to read aloud every single day…It is my favorite classroom practice [that] I loved with all my heart… I would often let students share what book they wanted me to share that day because they loved it…Then when I got to [current county], and I learned very quickly that we are not as teachers supposed to read anything that's not within our curriculum…No matter, the trade book, it could be Mo Willems… regardless, we are supposed to send a note to parents…I have hundreds of books in my classroom library so at that moment in the beginning of the year, making the list of every single one was just it wasn't something I could do at that moment.

She is a seasoned teacher with an advanced degree and connected that this practice is primarily due to the passing of SB 0623. Daniella also commented on SB 0623, stating that teachers do not teach Critical Race Theory in elementary school classes, which begs a larger question: What is the actual purpose of legislation like this? Daniella already noted that she has to be careful as an educator because she never knows how much she can talk about regarding race and racism; this circles back to the lack of trust and fear that

educators sometimes feel when stakeholders do not support them and when they are not allowed to make professional decisions.

Reflexivity. In my teaching career, I have felt the effects of the lack of trust for teachers. This could be in the way I was asked to keep data to "prove" I knew my students, excessively detailed lesson plans, and constant second-guessing from parents despite my years of experience and expertise. I have also felt the distrust from society as I see non-educators making policies about practices that they have never performed and expect teachers to implement, no matter how impractical or frivolous they are. The wave of legislation restricting what is taught in the classroom also feels, as the participants shared, like an unsettling sense of distrust.

Summary

Each participant addressed the lack of trust and systemic de-professionalization of teachers, with examples ranging from feeling a lack of confidence in them as teachers to restricting how and what they teach. Teachers go through intense training and participate in numerous education courses to be certified or licensed as educators. By micro-managing lesson plans, devaluing professional opinions, or being required to log in many hours of work to provide parents with classroom library book lists, is indicative of a lack of trust for educators.

The Value of Children's Lived Experiences

The second theme identified was the value of children's lived experiences. The value of children's lived experiences can be described as holding space for the knowledge that children bring into the classroom. These are particularly valuable when

considering conversations involving race and racism. Each participant mentioned in many ways children could handle more than adults when it comes to empathy and difficult conversations.

According to Dorian, “I do a lot of simulation… fairness, equality, justice is very hard for 6/7-year-olds,” recognizing that the conversations are essential. His approach made abstract ideas such as racism and privilege more concrete for first-graders. Once he created a simulation using a random distribution of lollipops and then later gave all the students lollipops, they could have productive conversations about subjects that may or may not have directly impacted them, such as opportunity, privilege, and racism.

Each participant felt passionate about allowing their students to discuss concepts such as race and racism. Noelle advocated for the experiences of Students of Color not to be overlooked; “I don't think that they're too young to have conversations about race at all. My Black students know that they're Black, like they know their experiences.” Noelle simply stated with conviction, "I'm not going to shy away from telling stories that represent the lives of the students in my class. There are age-appropriate ways to do things." She gave an example about the reproductive system and how those concepts build from year to year based on the developmental level of the students.

After providing a few examples in her interview about how issues and conversations about race and racism have surfaced, she said that, “They had an excellent conversation about it and I thought they handled it well, so I think it's about the teacher educating themselves… if you're uncomfortable with a situation.” This particular quote reiterates the position Noelle stated throughout her interview; it is essential to

continuously reflect to grow, and if there's a topic that makes her uncomfortable, she educates herself.

Another point that Noelle emphasized was that society underestimates children, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, to empathize with the struggles of another human; “I think we sometimes really discount children's ability to understand and empathize, especially children in poverty situations and things like that, like we, like these kids can understand what it feels like for the world to not be….”

Daniella often centered her responses around literacy. Being a second-grade teacher, she frequently referred to her literacy education as a conduit for discussing many topics in the classroom. She noted that many "discussions are prompted by literature" and that of those, many "critical conversations came out of trade books." One important consequence that she brought up during her interview was what happens if we do not allow these conversations.

> Sometimes, teachers are focused on teaching the history of it and less focused on the fact that, like these things that kids are still trying to figure out and if we skate around, it doesn't allow discussion… (they grow into adults who) don't know how to interact.

This excerpt from her interview speaks to one point in the literature that reflects how teachers promote students as critical citizens (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012). Trying to protect children from understanding facts is not helpful for anyone.

Reflexivity. In my experience as a classroom teacher, no matter which age group I teach, I always learn from my students. I agree with the sentiment expressed by Noelle that Students of Color know their racial backgrounds. To deny the existence of that in my classroom is not only silencing their voices, but robbing the children who may not directly experience racism the opportunity to empathize. It may be difficult at times, but I have found children are more capable of grasping the concepts of inequality and privilege than they are given credit. In Tennessee SB 0623 the language states that teachers may not engage in speech that causes "… discomfort, guilt, anguish, or… distress solely because of the individual's race or sex…." As a teacher, this language makes me wonder about my Students of Color and how their experiences fit into this legislation.

Summary

Each participant felt that valuing the lived experiences of children was essential to engaging in conversations about race and racism. Some participants used literature as a guide to answer student questions; while others used simulations to help make abstract ideas more concrete. The participants felt confident that their students could handle conversations involving race and racism.

Importance of a Cultural Insider

This theme appeared differently based on the participant's race in this study. I defined the theme of a cultural insider as an individual who has a first-hand account and knowledge of experiences directly related to the discussions of the culture. The teachers who identified as white continually expressed the importance of having a cultural insider

as a reference or guide. In contrast, the Teacher of Color expressed the importance of knowing and teaching every child.

Teaching every student is critical, especially teaching Students of Color "how to do school." Teachers may teach them to behave in the classroom, but Dorian notes a real lack in teaching how to succeed in other academic areas of school. He stated that teachers often would pass these students along, "talking at rather than talking to" them. This lack of connection and a lack of Students of Color being seen is detrimental, as evidenced by the overrepresentation of Students of Color in Dorian's higher needs cohort of students. Dorian spoke extensively about how there are a deficient number of Teachers of Color at his school and the negative impacts this has on the school culture, noting specifically that administrators "failed to recognize my gifts and talents… would rather me conform the way that I teach to how another teacher teaches rather than teach… don't value my authenticity." Dorian also felt that, "I'm not asked to the table, so I can give this feedback… I don't even have a seat at the table." When asked if cultural training was needed or offered, Dorian said that it was greatly needed and that one had been offered, but had failed in being received positively by the teachers.

Daniella also noted this same sentiment. Cultural training would benefit teachers not directly impacted by racism and other systemic issues. Still, she stated that the reaction from the [white] teachers was very disheartening in terms of that lack of introspection.

Noelle and Daniella shared self-reflection regarding their limitations when acting on authority of experiences that are not their own. Noelle strongly felt that it is vital to

engage in self-reflection stating, "you have to check yourself." She did this in several ways. Another way Noelle takes responsibility for her own growth is following Educators of Color on social media, seeking out opportunities for growth in cultural competency, and "listen[ing] to People of Color and their experiences and how they wished things had been addressed when they were in school." Listening to Teachers of Color speak about issues of race and racism with their students was another way Noelle exemplified the importance of a cultural insider when navigating these conversations.

Daniella gave a lot of self-reflection and critique of her limitations when discussing race and racism, a topic that does not directly impact her the same way it would a Person of Color. She was sincere and open, saying, "Brown and Black children that I still don't know what the hell I'm doing… and I still feel like I have no place in saying anything that's not, that I can't have backed up within a curriculum or within a book written by a cultural insider." Using literature that was from a cultural insider's perspective was necessary for her to feel comfortable discussing these issues, recognizing her limitations as "just a white lady." Having literature written by a cultural insider or the support of other Teachers and Administrators of Color in her school made her feel more comfortable having these discussions and navigating them more confidently. She later noted that it is essential to have Teachers of Color in the system and retain them, which is an issue in her district.

Reflexivity. At times in my career, I have also sought out the expertise of a cultural insider, though I have to be mindful not to make others do the work of reconciling my own biases for me. However, I do look toward cultural insiders, such as

Austin Channing-Brown, when dealing with issues of race and racism. I also received a graduate certificate in Cultural Studies to further my understanding of issues facing Communities of Color.

Summary

According to the participants, having a cultural insider was essential. Noelle and Daniella felt much more comfortable having cultural insiders as people to look to, whether directly or indirectly, to guide conversations or situations involving race. Dorian felt that cultural insiders were critical to have in the building in a more balanced number. Both Daniella and Noelle also felt it critical to engage in the work themselves in order to grow. They emphasized that doing their own work was their responsibility.

Allowing Students to Think Critically

This theme emerged in general, but specifically when asking each participant about the ban on Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools in Tennessee. I define the theme of allowing students to think critically as giving the students facts about history, social studies, and current events, and giving them space to form their own opinions using the tools of a critical thinker. As with previous research identified in this study, developing critical thinkers and citizens is essential (DeNicola and Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012).

With legislation that interferes with what teachers can and cannot teach, it became a talking point in the interviews to think about what society is not allowing students to do which participants indicated is thinking for themselves. Each participant agreed that it is the educator's job, the professional, to give students the facts and the critical thinking

skills they need to form their own opinions. Withholding historical truths does not allow for this process to take place. According to the participants in this study, it hinders the learning process and delays the teacher's ability to teach.

Dorian echoed this sentiment. He wants his students to have the knowledge they need in order to think for themselves.

> [I] arm students with knowledge…to put knowledge into action…my job as an educator is to give you the information as a student…I don't put my feelings, how I feel, or how I think about what I teach my kids….Give them the facts.

This reinforces that these participants want to teach the facts, not indoctrinate with personal opinions. Dorian continued:

> My job as an educator is to give you the information as a student. You can paint your own canvas. I don't put my bias. I don't put my feelings, how I feel, how I think, what I teach my kids…give them the facts and children are great judges of character. Students are becoming free-thinkers, now they are, they have this ability to make decisions and to see racism as what it is and to see slavery as what it was, and they don't want to continue those systems of oppression…So well that 30 years of students to think this way, die off and we'll put this plan in place so that they can't give birth to other free-thinkers. And this movement will die off and we'll go back to slavery and racism and Holocaust and…we'll just pretend that it didn't happen. It happens again, they have no point of reference to realize 'hey, did this happen somewhere else before? Where did this happen?'

Noelle questioned the goal of public education when politicians propose and pass bans, "makes me think of banned books and, in general, like controlling what is said to our kids, what's the goal of public education…" In light of SB 0623, Noelle noted that "there's still ways to still teach and be honest about what has happened to people without being in legal trouble at the elementary level."

Noelle emphasized how important it is to guide discussions and allow for critical thinking to occur naturally:

> I mean it's truly just like I don't think that there's anything wrong with teaching history as it actually happened and I teach my students to think about history critically and if Critical Race Theory is something that becomes a theory that they think along those lines, I'm not going to stop them from thinking or having conversations.

Noelle continued to say, regarding giving students the opportunity to speak for themselves:

> I think we sometimes are really focused on teaching the history of it and less focused on the fact that, like these are things that, like kids are still trying to figure out and if we skate around it and don't give them the opportunity to discuss and think that they don't like learn and then they go into adults that don't know how to interact with people who are different than them either.

Denying access to certain information does not prevent students from being exposed to events happening around them. Noelle stated:

> People of Color experiencing atrocities still um but, like the kids know that stuff happens when the Black Lives Matter marches and protests were happening when the riot at the Capitol happened, like the kids know that stuff and they associate it with their experiences and my students have a very different experiences and my classes but um I don't know I also think like picture books that's a big way that I try to address some of these concepts as I use the words of someone who's like taking the time to put it in age appropriate [terms].

Daniella noted that these bans try to "keep white people happy". She questioned where teachers draw the line because we are educated with facts and truth. When reading a book on Jackie Robinson, second graders naturally have questions about topics that make some adults uncomfortable. Daniella reinforced that allowing the literature to guide the discussions with facts was important. According to the TEAM rubric, a commonly used Tennessee teacher evaluation tool, questioning is a higher-level skill teachers want their students to have (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). Daniella gave an example of a Brain Pop video that offers a realistic perspective about the first Thanksgiving and how it was not all "rainbows." Giving students the information and skills embedded in good teaching practices is critical.

Reflexivity. As I worked for four years with pre-service teachers, I gave frequent feedback that involved elevating students' critical thinking skills with the eventual goal of making them self-initiate their learning. The idea of withholding facts and information does not align with best teaching practices. In the teacher education courses, as well as professional development that I have been a part of, I have consistently been encouraged

to teach children *how* to think, as opposed to *what* to think. This occurs when I give children facts and information and teach them how to the apply strategies I taught them.

Summary

Each teacher in this study felt it was critical to give children the facts and the tools to develop their own opinions. By withholding facts, children cannot fully understand people or events. Each participant felt it was the teacher's job to provide the facts, as well as the tools to think and explore critically.

Provide Professional Development

The last theme identified in this study emphasizes the importance of providing teachers professional development opportunities. These can be in the form of pre-service or in-service trainings and courses. In each interview, the participants referred to the importance and need for these trainings.

Dorian stated, regarding any additional trainings, "…we did one class. It was shut down after that…the idea has never been revisited again…and it's very much so needed." Even with his experience, he noted that it would be worth the effort to have trainings to help teachers become more culturally competent.

Daniella referenced a similar sentiment regarding professional development. The training she discussed entailed being more culturally aware and examining biases.

> It was basically a training…a few years ago. That did not go well at all. It was just…I can't even remember how we called it… just the feedback from those teachers who, of course, were mostly white. That was just so bizarre to me because, in my mind everything that presenter was sharing, I was like see how

> obvious this is…in our society, it's endemic, like it's here. And then to have teachers stand up enraged that we would even think that they had biases…

She reflected on how interesting it was to see the training fail when it was clearly needed. Both Daniella and Dorian expressed how critical this type of professional development is to being culturally competent and aware. If teachers are not receiving this training, then what is the expectation of cultural competence in the classroom? Are teachers expected to already have this knowledge, or is it disregarded as unimportant?

In addition to in-service professional development, teacher education courses and programs also have the opportunity to provide this information. Noelle said, I think that there's a way to be cautious about it in a sense. I remember with [my professor]…he was talking about how you have to be respectful of the culture and the beliefs of the parents…." She continued:

> …if you have a child that has been taught something directly at home, it's not your job to teach that, but it's your job to give students information and teach them how to think about the information so they grow up to think for themselves.

She reflected on the education she received while still in a teacher preparation program. Clearly, she has taken her knowledge with her and applied it appropriately in the classroom.

While teachers go through courses and trainings to become licensed teachers, there is still an ongoing need, as Dorian and Daniella pointed out, to have continuous

professional development to help teachers already in the field. These trainings receive push-back, but this study indicates it is needed.

Reflexivity. In my formal teacher education courses, cultural competency training was not offered. While I have had many opportunities during my doctoral program, as well as during my tenure as a teacher in Los Angeles, I understand that many teachers do not have those options. For me, I do not think I could be an effective white educator without those trainings. I am constantly revisiting my own biases, and courses such as those help me de-center my own experiences and make space for the experiences of all people I interact with, not just students.

Summary

Each participant expressed the importance of professional development in the area of cultural awareness. Dorian and Daniella focused more on the ongoing aspect of teacher training, while Noelle reflected on her courses during her teacher education program, which she still uses in her classroom. Taken altogether, cultural awareness trainings should happen in both pre- and in-service teaching environments. The importance of professional development is consistent with previous scholarship (Bolgatz, 2005; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Singleton & Hays, 2008). These professional development opportunities are needed to help not only with best teaching practices, but to navigate these practices with the passage of laws like SB 0623.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented data collected from the participants' interviews. The data was then analyzed with Critical Race Theory as the analytical tool. The themes of

trust/distrust in teachers, the value of children's lived experiences, the importance of a cultural insider, and allowing students to think critically were presented, followed by a reflexivity statement and a summary.

CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In this study, I interviewed three elementary public-school teachers in Tennessee. These teachers all had at least three years of public-school teaching experience in Tennessee and were teaching in the classroom during the 2021-2022 school year. The data from the interviews were used to develop narratives and identify themes using critical narrative inquiry (Casey, 1995; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Schubert & Ayers, 1992). This research sought to contribute to the literature by addressing the following research question and providing recommendations for practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers based on the findings.

How do elementary teachers experience race and racism in their schools and classrooms?

This chapter is organized by discussion, implications, and future research opportunities. Specifically, it should be noted that this study was impacted by the passing of Tennessee SB 0623, which bans concepts related to Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools. This created an additional layer of complexity for this study that was not anticipated.

In Spring 2021, Tennessee became one of 22 states to pass or propose a ban on teaching concepts related to Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools (Adams et al., 2021). The interpretation of this legislation appeared to cover more than just a ban on Critical Race Theory, which is typically only taught in graduate and law schools. This law

specified a ban on language and instruction that cause, "…discomfort, guilt, anguish, or… distress solely because of the individual's race or sex…" (Tennessee Senate Bill 0623, 2021). This took an already identified problem, discussing race and racism in the classroom, and magnified it. The 2021-2022 school year was the first school year in Tennessee to operate under this ban. The ramifications of this bill could be seen in the difficulty in recruiting participants since the consequences of violating SB 0623 could result in teachers losing their jobs and teaching licenses and/or state funding being withheld from school districts.

Discussion

The participants provided a greater understanding of how elementary teachers experience race and racism in schools and in the classroom. In this section of Chapter Six, I present a discussion of the findings (see Chapter 5) and how those findings compare to the literature. This provides a foundation for understanding the potential impact of legislation such as Tennessee's SB 0623 and the study implications.

First, the benefits of engaging in critical conversations and meaningful discussions about race are important for students (Brown & Brown, 2011; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011). Previous research identifies the importance of engaging in critical race discussions, both for students who identify racially as white and for Students of Color (Brown & Brown, 2011; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Tatum, 1994). These studies (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012) highlight the essential nature of engaging in conversations to promote students becoming critical citizens. In this study, participants felt that developing critical thinkers

is essential and agreed that giving students the tools to think critically, and allowing them space to do so, was important. As previous research (Bogatz, 2005) has indicated is necessary, participants provided and clearly communicated that their classrooms were safe spaces.

In this study, the participants emphasized a desire to decenter whiteness and ensure that there was representation for all their students. Avoiding these conversations has not been shown to benefit children. In fact, the opposite has been demonstrated in the research (Sue, 2016). Previous research also supports the idea that students can engage in these conversations when taught critical thinking skills (Bogatz, 2005). Whereas, the literature also indicates that avoiding conversations about race and racism has a negative effect on children (Sue, 2016). Additionally, the experiences of Students of Color will continue to be decentered if a colorblind ideology is adopted or topics related to race and racism are avoided (Leonardo, 2013). Moreover, as Dorian echoed in his interview, if we do not teach our past, we will repeat it.

As mentioned above, prior research also supports creating safe environments for children to have critical discussions about race and racism (Coles- Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Copenhaver, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Participants emphasized wanting their students to think critically as opposed to being overly concerned about age-appropriateness. This is relevant because the literature emphasizes hesitancy around addressing topics such as race and racism because of concern about age-appropriateness (Brown et al., 2017). However, study participants felt more confident

about addressing this topic in an age-appropriate manner; their [Daniella and Noelle] hesitancy was due more to their desire to present as culturally competent.

Previous scholarship indicates teachers feel apprehensive and reluctant (Bolgatz, 2005; Copenhaver, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kello, 2016; Philpot et al., 2011; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012) due to controversy, age-appropriateness, and lack of cultural competency training/education (Alvarez, 2019; Bolgatz, 2005; Buchanan, 2015; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Two of the study participants communicated some degree of apprehension. The teacher's fear/hesitancy was more related to a desire to have the voice of an authentic cultural insider present in the curriculum/classroom, specifically with Daniella and Noelle. In the case of Daniella, she reported a hesitancy to age-appropriateness as well, which is consistent with previous research (Bolgatz, 2005; Brown et al., 2017).

To address this, each participant suggested professional development. Having some form of professional development in this area in order to become more culturally aware and navigate situations involving race and racism is necessary. Research also supports the concept of having professional development that addresses conversations involving race and racism (Bolgatz, 2005; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Lazar & Offenberg, 2011; Singleton & Hays, 2008). Milner and Laughter (2015) suggested more critical training in teacher education courses to help prepare teachers in the most effective ways possible. Moving the curriculum in teacher education courses to focus on race and poverty issues has a greater potential to serve in social justice and equity capacities.

While focusing on pre-service teacher training is necessary, it is also important to offer professional development to the teachers currently in the classroom. The participants in this study echoed the need for more professional development when it comes to being culturally competent and being able to effectively navigate conversations about race and racism. Therefore, it is critical to note that not only is more training in teacher preparation programs needed, but training for in-service teachers is equally important.

However, it is imperative to discuss why these culturally competent trainings are not already widely available and used. In fact, with legislation such as Tennessee's SB 0623, the education pendulum appears to be moving in the opposite direction from the research. Restrictive bills do not allow for safe, constructive discussions of race-related topics, nor do these bills place an emphasis on professional development to help teachers navigate these issues, which contradict prior research. When examining the concept of interest convergence (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1999), which occurs when the racial majority benefits from a seemingly altruistic act, it is important to understand the dissonance between the expressed need for cultural competency trainings and the lack of trainings available. In this case, research indicates the benefit of additional courses and training (Alvarez, 2018; Singleton & Hayes, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004); however, as highlighted in the findings, those trainings are not being offered. Perhaps once cultural competency trainings have a benefit for the racial majority, such as a monetary benefit or, as in the case with *Brown v Board of Education* (Bell, 2004), a benefit to reputation, they will be more widely accepted and available.

Implications

As the landscape of education is shifting with new legislation outlawing how teachers discuss race and racism, this study offers implications for practitioners and researchers to proactively provide a guide to addressing issues of race and racism in the elementary classroom. These implications, which are discussed more in depth below, are a need for cultural insider voices and cultural competency training, safe spaces for children to engage in conversations about race and racism, a need to promote students as critical thinkers, and a need to revise policies.

This study suggests a need for cultural insiders when considering how to address race and racism in the elementary classroom. Each participant noted this to various extents. There is a two-pronged approach to this implication. First, being aware and inclusive of the voices of People of Color. Second, being aware and taking action to do one's own work towards cultural competency (Miller & Harris, 2018).

This implication could be hiring and retaining more Teachers of Color. Both Dorian and Daniella discussed the importance of not only hiring Teachers of Color, but retaining them. This is a critical aspect of being more inclusive as we move toward a more diverse student population. However, retaining Teachers of Color is more than just being cognizant of our student population; it is imperative that Teachers' of Color perspectives and experiences are being valued in our education system. Schools' and districts' hiring practices should be revisited to ensure that recruiting and retention efforts for People of Color are maximized. It is also critical to use literature that reflects authentic Voices of Color. Actively including counter-narratives in the curriculum, in this

case by using literature, help validate Students' of Color experience and decenters whiteness (Leonardo, 2013). Both Daniella and Noelle expressed this in their interview. Using literature, as in Rogers and Mosely's (2006) study, is an effective way to help students make connections to the past and present, as well as discuss racial themes. Curriculum should utilize literature that authentically moves towards this goal of being more inclusive of Voices of Color.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that white educators need to be responsible for their own anti-racist work (Miller & Harris, 2018), as reflected by Noelle and Daniella. This should *not* fall on People of Color (Miller & Harris. 2018). By providing training and materials to educators that meet cultural competency requirements, or restructuring curricula teacher education programs, teachers can be better equipped to handle issues related to race and racism (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Professional development, such as ones that incorporate multicultural education, is consistent with recommendations from previous research (Alvarez, 2018; Singleton & Hayes, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). At the school and district level, I recommend educating teachers on how to discuss race and racism under current state laws, such as Tennessee's SB 0623.

Training is another critical implication of this study. More training is needed for teachers to provide students with safe environments in which they can actively participate in critical learning. Research supports the importance of teachers providing a safe environment for these conversations (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Copenhaver, 2000;

Godreau et al., 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Through the interviews, it was evident that participants provided safe environments to facilitate these discussions.

Additionally, the research suggests that developing critical citizens is important (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012). Each participant in this study expressed how important it is for students to be taught with accuracy and facts as well as how to be critical thinkers. However, this may require additional training for teachers, especially given the current climate under restrictive measures such as Tennessee's SB 0623.

To implement the suggestions above, it is important to understand the components of such bills as Tennessee's SB 0623. It is also important to understand best teaching practices. To work within the parameters, training needs to be implemented in the form of professional development for in-service teachers. Teacher education programs need to equip new teachers with information about these laws. In Tennessee, licensed teachers are trained in best teaching practices based on state evaluations. I have performed many state-sanctioned teacher evaluations that assessed the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills and skills that ultimately support students in navigating their learning. When these laws are present, it is important for teachers to be prepared to work within the parameters.

A final implication includes the need to revisit laws and policies such as Tennessee's SB 0623. Students need to become critical citizens (DeNicola & Franquiz, 2000; Godreau et al., 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Zembylas & Kabbani, 2012). This study also found that students need to be allowed to think critically. The three

participants in this study emphasized that students should be given facts and taught how to think critically. The participants noted that students can handle challenging topics and that it is imperative to teach them the skills necessary to form their own opinions based on facts. Fully informed and educated views may not be created if the information is redacted from the curriculum. Therefore, teachers under evaluation of current state-sanctioned rubrics must be allowed to thoroughly teach the facts that make those rubrics a valid form of teacher assessments. This reflects the sentiments of the study participants, which emphasizes the importance of teaching facts and critical thinking skills.

One aspect to consider is what needs to happen for these implications to become a reality. Drawing from interest convergence, which suggests that People of Color only advance when it benefits the dominant white culture in the U.S. (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1999), future action and research should take into account what benefit to the racial majority exists.

Future Research

The voices of teachers, especially Teachers of Color, should continue to be studied. In this study, Dorian offered different perspectives from Noelle and Daniella when it came to how he experienced race and racism in schools and classrooms. In this study, I wanted not only more participants, but specifically more Participants of Color. Recruitment was challenging for two reasons. The first being geographic location. During the participant recruitment phase of this study, I lived in Atlanta, Georgia. All participants needed to be located in Tennessee. Another challenge was the potential consequences participants faced if they violated Tennessee's SB 0623. This bill took

effect in the school year 2021-2022. The consequences of violating SB 0623 could result in teachers losing their jobs and licenses.

Initially, I aimed at recruiting four teachers hoping for a racial balance. Recruitment for this study was a challenge, despite snowball sampling and reaching out to professional contacts. Despite the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board protections, I conclude that the fear of losing one's job is a reality for many teachers. In light of this, I would suggest more qualitative approaches in this area to continue this line of research.

Another opportunity for future research is to examines the experiences of teachers in states with similar bans to SB 0623. Conversely, researchers could conduct at comparative analysis of teachers from Tennessee to states that do not have a ban on discussions of racism in place. A recommendation for future research is to increase the number of participants. In this study, each interview was 60 minutes. Findings from longer and/or multiple interviews from a longitudinal study could further guide practical implementation of discussions about race and racism at school and state levels.

Additionally, the research could focus on students and their interpretation of historical events. Turning the focus towards students could lead to further understanding of how students internalize historical and current events about race and racism. This line of research could be conducted in environments that have restrictive legislation in place as well as environments that do not. This data could be used to assist educators and researchers in cultivating environments that are best for students to learn and think critically about historical and current events.

A final research focus could explore the effects of legislation, such as SB 0623, in a longitudinal manner. The effects on teachers and students over time could highlight further issues associated with restrictive measures in the field of education. How this affects teacher retention, student learning, and social development may be the focus of future studies. While the teachers I interviewed have faced struggles in discussing race and racism among elementary students, they feel the restrictive legislation has made their work even harder. The effects of this ban need to be studied further to understand the impact on both teachers and students. Further, studies should also strive to emphasize teacher experiences and offer practical suggestions for all working in education.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the study findings and implications and contextualized the research findings within the existing literature. The implications discussed are important for districts, schools, and administrators regarding hiring practices and professional development. They are also important for teachers as a starting point for navigating important discussions about race and racism.

While there are few studies on how elementary teachers and students engage in discussions about race and racism, this dissertation contributes to the literature by discussing how new legislation can affect these conversations about race and racism. An important starting point for future research examines legislation restricting how teachers approach race-related classroom topics. Conversations about how to best support teachers should persist. As the legislation that restricts how race and racism is discussed in schools is introduced and passed, more data is needed on how these changes affect teachers and

students. While Critical Race Theory has existed in education for almost 30 years (see Ladson-Billings, 1995), its moment in the national spotlight is more recent, resulting in opposition and the legislative bans passed in numerous states, including Tennessee. This type of legislation indicates a distrust of educators. Furthermore, despite the distrust teachers feel, educators continue to trust their students to think critically about important issues. It is my hope that this study prompts additional dialogue, research, and, most importantly, more actions on behalf of educators whose jobs are to make every student feel seen and valued.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from Chapter Five and contextualized the research findings within the established literature. This study serves as a starting point of investigation related to the effects of legislation restricting how teachers approach race-related topics in their classrooms.

Final Remarks

I hope this dissertation will serve as a way to advance the discussion on how race and racism are discussed, taught, and addressed in elementary public schools in Tennessee. It is, by no means, a final thought or a definitive piece. This conversation and research should continue and grow. As the conversation around Critical Race Theory in schools and legislation is introduced and passed, we will need more data on how these changes affect teachers and students. While Critical Race Theory has been in existence for more than 40 years, its moment in the national spotlight is recent, specifically resulting in the legislative bans seen in numerous states, including Tennessee. These

measures indicate distrust of educators, even as educators trust their students to think critically about complex issues. I hope that this study will prompt more discussions, more investigations, and, most importantly, more actions on behalf of educators whose jobs are to teach every student.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide— Highlighting Teacher Voices: Discussions on Race and Racism in the Elementary Classroom

Research Question :

- What are elementary school teachers' experiences with classroom conversations about race and racism?

Interview Question:

1. Tell me about an experience where race/racism came up in your class?
    a. Has there ever been a time when you addressed race/racism in your class? If so, please tell me about that if so. If not, why not?
2. How did your students react in these situations?
    a. How did you (the teacher) react in these situations?
3. In what ways does the school/community environment impact these experiences?
    a. In what ways does the curriculum used at your school impact these experiences?
4. Do you combat a Euro-centric narrative in your classrooms when race/racism is addressed?
    a. If so, what strategies do you use to combat a traditionally Euro-centric narrative in the curriculum?
    b. Why is this important/ unimportant?

5. (Article Prompt) “Schwinn: Guidance for what Tennessee teachers can and can’t teach on race will come by August 1” by Marta W. Aldrich.

- How does this article make you feel? How has this ban on classroom discussions impact you personally/professionally? How does this change your teaching practices?

6. What are your thoughts on the overall attention Critical Race Theory is getting withing the realm of education, particularly in K-12 schools? How do you see this impacting students and curriculum?

APPENDIX B

Consent for Research Participation Research

Study Title: Highlighting Teacher Voices: Discussions on Race and Racism in the Elementary Classroom.

Researcher: Carrie Buckner, University of Tennessee, Knoxville Faculty Advisor: Amy Broemmel, Ph.D. University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an elementary, public school teacher in Tennessee with at least 3 years of teaching experience.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to understand how teachers in Tennessee handle conversations surrounding race and racism in the elementary classroom. Also, this study will examine teachers' opinions and experiences regarding discussions about race and racism in the classroom.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will continue and will involve one Zoom- recorded video conference interview not to exceed 60 minutes. A follow-up meeting to member- check the data may occur in the weeks following the initial interview.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to:
Video conference using Zoom software for one interview. A follow up meeting will occur only to ensure the accuracy of the interview data from the participant. Interview sessions will be Zoom audio and video recorded, de-identified for confidentiality, and transcribed for analysis.

· Prior to the interview you will be asked meet with the researcher one week prior via Zoom to ensure all technology is working and to answer any questions before the interview.

· During the interviews, you will be asked to share your opinions and experiences regarding discussions about race and racism in the elementary classroom.

· No student work or lesson plans will be collected for analysis.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study at any time. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed:

· Contact Carrie Buckner or her faculty advisor Dr. Amy Broemmel · cbuckne1@vols.utk.edu or broemmel@utk.edu

· If you withdraw from the study all recorded interviews and identifiable researcher notes will be permanently deleted.

· If notified that you wish to stop participation beyond the point that data has been deidentified (names, locations, and identifiable information removed from data), it will not be possible remove data

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Even if you don't benefit from being in the study, your participation may help us to learn more about how elementary teachers are able to address issues regarding race and racism. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

· Interviews will occur over Zoom video conferencing software, and recorded for transcriptions.

· Data files will be stored on Carrie Buckner's university One Drive cloud storage. This format has been evaluated to be the most secure option. Only Carrie Buckner can access the video, and signing in requires a two-factor identification protocol that uses a password.

· Zoom interviews will be transcribed. Then Carrie Buckner will review for accuracy and remove any identifiable information including names, schools, and districts. · If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came

from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include: IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-

· People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

· Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, **Carrie Buckner** 323-868-0017 cbuckne1@vols.utk.edu or her advisor **Dr. Amy Broemmel** broemmel@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue Blount Hall, Room 408 Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

Consent will be provided verbally in the first Zoom meeting.

VITA

Carrie Buckner was born in Chattanooga, TN. After earning her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Tennessee and her master's degree in teaching from Lee University, she moved to Los Angeles, CA. She resided in Los Angeles for 13 years before moving back to Tennessee to earn her doctorate degree in education. Carrie now resides in Atlanta, GA with her two children, Emily and Daniel.