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"I Like Reading, but I Like Reading what I Like": A White Teacher's Autoethnographic Journey into the Literacy Lives of Black Female Adolescent Readers

Kelly Bailes Wallace
University of Tennessee, kbailes@vols.utk.edu

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Kelly Bailes Wallace entitled ""I Like Reading, but I Like Reading what I Like": A White Teacher's Autoethnographic Journey into the Literacy Lives of Black Female Adolescent Readers." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Susan L. Groenke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Michelle D. Commander, J. Amos Hatch, Judson C. Laughter

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
“I Like Reading, but I Like Reading what I Like”:
A White Teacher’s Autoethnographic Journey into the Literacy Lives of Black Female
Adolescent Readers

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kelly Bailes Wallace
May 2018
Dedication

For those who are owed payment on their educational debts,
and to those who are trying to right those debts.
Acknowledgements

This is for Carter. I started this project when he was 3 years old; at my graduation, he will be almost 8. This is the sibling he always wanted. This is for nights I was in class—for all the bedtimes and soccer practices I missed. For all the times I couldn’t play another board game or Legos or basketball any longer because I had to write. This is for Carter thinking he will never have to go to the doctor any more. This is for all the times he has called me Mrs. Doctor Mommy and told me he was proud of me.

This is for Carlos. He worked harder when I left my full-time teaching career for part-time graduate assistant work and full-time doctoral student status. He was my biggest cheerleader along the way. He became a single-parent at times, a full-time chef, and a lone sleeper as I sat awake at night writing.

This is for my parents. When I was hesitant to begin this journey, they were puzzled. They’ve always had more faith in me than I’ve had in myself. They have encouraged me and supported me and walked beside me. This is for all the times they played school with me and made sure I was surrounded by books.

This is for my Nanny and Bob who crossed over during this process. They always made me feel like I was the smartest, most-capable girl. My Bob was a closet feminist; he was always proud when I beat the boys. When I cross the stage, I will hear him yelling “Atta girl!” from up above and my Nanny’s sweet voice saying she’s sure I was the smartest one there.

This is for my teacher friends who became just friends who became family. I’ve missed them dearly and have cherished the time this research project allowed me to spend with them.

This is for the students at Creswell High School who gave up days over summer, missed their favorite class periods, and stayed late after school to bravely share with me their beliefs about reading and what it is like to be a student of color in today’s educational climate.

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This is for the moms, the first-generation college graduates, the mis-understood feminists, the teachers who feel they are never good enough. This is for all the Wonder Women out there building each other up.

This is for a new beginning. A re-invention. A return to my roots.
Abstract

When the English teachers at Creswell High School were presented with data that exposed their students’ of color underachievement per English Language Arts standardized state test scores, the teachers were tasked with creating a literacy initiative to increase students’ performance. Using Action Research and Autoethnographic methods, this study seeks to explore Black students’ perceptions of Creswell Reads, a ‘one book, one school’ summer reading program, along with their personal literacy identities both in and out of school. I helped to implement this literacy program before I realized that many American classrooms, including mine, were ostracizing students of color yet wondering why these same students were underachieving per standardized test scores. As a result, this inquiry also parallels my racial awakening to the exploration of how to make a local school’s literacy initiative—one I had a hand in making—more student centered and racially conscious and to present those findings to Creswell High School’s literacy team.
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Chapter One: White Teachers, Black Students

As a life-long reader, literature major, and teacher, searching for meaningful stories is central to my identity. When I find stories that help me make sense of things I can’t make sense of on my own, I latch on to them. They show me I am not alone and provide a path to naming and untangling the confusion that plagued me. Two such stories are White Teacher (Paley, 1979) and Helms’ (1990a) model of White racial identity development. The story that follows is my personal story interwoven with the experiences of teacher, Vivian Gussin Paley and psychologist/researcher, Janet E. Helms. They helped me to make sense of my experiences of a White teacher of Black students, and my hope is that my experiences, alongside theirs, will help others along their journey of teaching students who are racially different than themselves (Helms, 1990a). Throughout this story, my personal experiences and reflections are italicized while my progression through the stages of White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990a) are labeled. I have learned that the beginning of the untangling begins with an honest look inside myself.

Vivian Gussin Paley’s (1979) text White Teacher chronicles, in first-person, her journey to acknowledge and discuss race with her kindergarten students, their parents, and her colleagues in her recently integrated classroom. She also, “…examines and challenges society’s values as reflected in the classroom, not in a self-righteous and condemning way, but through the examination of her own prejudices, blindspots, and shortcomings that inevitably result from growing up in this society” (Comer & Poussaint, 1979, p. vii). Standing the test of time, this educational text has become a staple of many educational classes and literature reviews. Almost 40 years later after the publication of White Teacher, educators across America (including me), are still grappling with how to ethically and effectively teach non-White students and how to address race and racism in our classrooms and in our school systems. While reading this text, I
identified with Paley’s struggle to address race in her classroom in a society that was, and still is, hesitant to have productive discussions about race.

On the other hand, Janet Helms’ (1990a) model of White racialization posits that Whites, “…must accept [their] own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another” (p. 49). In order to develop a “positive White racial identity,” individuals must engage in two processes: 1) abandoning racism and 2) developing “a non-racist White identity” (p. 49). Progressing through these stages consists of six parts. While abandoning racism, individuals move through the following sub-stages: A) contact, B) disintegration, and C) reintegration. Individuals then progress to the stage of developing a “positive White racial identity,” by experiencing the following sub-stages: D) Pseudo-independence, E) Immersion/Emersion, and F) Autonomy. While Helms proposes that this process is linear, teacher educators Sandra M. Lawrence and Beverly Daniel Tatum (n.d.) believe that individuals can work from more than one stage at a time making it a more iterative process. They explain, “Because the ideology of White racial superiority is so deeply embedded in our culture, the process of ‘unlearning racism’ is a journey we need to continue throughout our lives” (p. 3).

The first stage, the Contact stage, is described as a stage of “…‘color-blindness in which the person is oblivious to her or his own racial characteristics and attempts to pretend that others have none” (Helms, 1990b, p. 10). To these individuals, Whiteness in a taken-for-granted norm and the privileges that Whiteness affords, are rarely examined (Lawrence & Tatum, n.d.). Entering into the contact stage of identity is prompted by a White person’s first realization of the existence of Black individuals. The reaction to this first contact is often heavily influenced by the person’s family environment and affects how one reacts to the initial contact. Common
reactions are fear, curiosity, or a surface level awareness of one’s own Whiteness. While individuals in the contact stage are accepting of Black people, they may experience anxiety when interacting with them (Helms, 1990a). The section below describes my experience as both a child and a teacher in the Contact stage of the White Racialization Identity Model.

The Misguided Notion of Colorblindness

Paley and I also shared a similar upbringing before we even stepped foot in the classroom as teachers. Even though Paley grew up in the 1930s and 1940s (pre-Civil Rights era) and I in the 1980s and 1990 (post-Civil Rights era), we both shared a similar upbringing regarding race. We were two White young ladies who never used racial slurs nor were we allowed to show disrespect to Black people in any obvious way (Paley, 1979). Instead, the way we showed respect was by, “…completely ignoring black people as black people. Colorblindness was the essence of the creed” (p. 9). It was impolite, even forbidden, for Paley or me to bring up skin color. We had been socialized to believe, “…race was on a very short list of topics that polite people do not discuss” (Michael & Bartoli, 2014, para. 2). We were all the same, all just people, regardless of skin color. If we mentioned skin color or race it meant we were showing racist attitudes by acknowledging a somehow shameful difference (Michael & Bartoli, 2014).

I vividly remember the first time I noticed race. It was kindergarten. I remember climbing off the bus after school and asking my mom if I could be Jerome’s girlfriend—long story short—because he was Black. My mom responded with a trail of “Yes,” “Of course,” “Why would you ask that?” “What does it matter what color his skin is?” However, at 5 years old, something had cued me into the concept that Black skin and White skin had different social acceptances tied to them. I think of this moment often.
I wonder if he remembers this day. Memories are born, they are constructed. And as we re-remember them throughout our lives, they are deconstructed and reconstructed into different forms. I wonder if a memory was created for him this day. Did he, too, go home and tell his mother? I wonder if this moment was as formative for him as it was for me. Or, was it just another racialized experience in a long line of racialized experiences? I wonder if he remembers our historically positioned selves colliding on an elementary school bus (Rankine, 2014)?

I am certain that if Jerome were White, the conversation with my mother would not have occurred; I would not have thought to ask my mom if a White boy could be my boyfriend.

This is evidence of my White racial socialization as passive and reactive (Michael & Bartoli, 2014). According to racial socialization scholars, “active racial socialization occurs in contexts in which racial socialization is deemed essential for children’s ability to effectively navigate their world” (para. 5). However, most White families avoid developing racial competencies in their children, which leads to a silencing of race talk—even when children initiate it, as I did in the case with my mother. I believe that my mother, in an attempt to not appear racist, quickly dismissed my question about dating a Black classmate. Rather than acknowledge, that yes, if I chose to “date” a Black boy, some people in society would disapprove, our talk was cut short because she had also been socialized to believe that any talk about race is racist (Michael & Bartoli, 2014), especially in the context of acknowledging a difference in skin color.

Even though race is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a biological marker, it is a social construction that most White Americans buy into even if they refuse to discuss it (Pollock, 2004). Even though Whites pretend not to see race, we do, and this denial spills over into what we feel are appropriate conversations. In other words, we feel that if we do not talk
about race, then we are proving that we do not see race, and are, therefore, unprejudiced. So, even though both Paley and I were trying to promote sameness, or colorblindness, in order to provide a false sense of equality, we were denying a major facet of many people’s identities: race. Many people of color sustain systemic abuse and refusing to engage in race talks also refuses to acknowledgement these prejudicial experiences.

Through our acceptance of colorblind ideology, we were not just negating the importance of skin color, we were refusing to acknowledge the different experiences of Black individuals (Leonardo, 2016). By attempting to show respect, we were showing disrespect. According to Michael and Bartoli (2014), “…silence leaves unchallenged the many racial messages children receive from a number of socializing agents, which consistently place whites at the top of the racial hierarchy” (para. 5). By refusing to honestly consider the importance that race plays in individuals’ life experiences, I had been upholding the status quo that the White experience was the normative experience.

It is a troublesome cycle. Since race is a dangerous myth created by man (Montagu, 1997), society should acknowledge this fallacy and erase racial categories from their speech and their thought (Pollock, 2004). However, “…deleting race words can actually help make race matter more” (p. 3). By ignoring the fallacy, we ignore the many oppressions that the fallacy has created. We cannot change an oppressive system if we cannot name it. Ignoring the race label Black is not going to make prejudice disappear. In fact, “Such anxiety about using the word ‘black’ also suggests insidiously, as it has for several centuries, that simply labeling someone as ‘black’ in the United States still feels to many ‘whites’ and others like a dangerously negative evaluation” (p. 205). Deleting race talk does not only make us colorblind, but it also makes us “colormute.”
Because of my racial socialization into colorblindness and colormuteness (Pollock, 2004) I have grown into an adult who is both afraid to and does not know how to talk about race and racism. According to Critical Whiteness researcher Cheryl Matias (2015), “…denying race during white childhood via a color-blind ideology leaves lasting emotional scars, impressions that perpetuate the institutional silencing of race….This ‘abuse’ is projected onto urban students of color and, more broadly, people of color” (p. 194). Since I grew up with the belief that race did not matter and it is not something I was supposed to talk about, I felt paralyzed as a White teacher to have productive discussions about race and racism in my classroom. At first, I could not see or name racial disparities, and once I did, I lacked the words to discuss them.

Refusing to discuss the Black race label actually illustrates a denial of race issues in our schools. Similarly, “While white parents’ intention is to convey to their children the belief that race shouldn’t matter, the message their children receive is that race, in fact, doesn’t matter. The intent and aim are noble, but in order for race not to matter in the long run, we have to acknowledge that, currently, it does matter a great deal” (Michael & Bartoli, 2014, para. 4).

For example, when Paley (1979) held a parent conference, a Black mother explained that another teacher said, “There is no color difference in my classroom. All my children look alike to me” (p. 12). The parent reacted to the previous teacher’s comment by saying,

‘What rot…my children are black. They don’t look like your children. They know they’re black, and we want it recognized. It’s a positive difference, an interesting difference, a comfortable natural difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about’. (p. 12)

In this parent’s eyes, the refusal of her child’s teacher to acknowledge race was a refusal to acknowledge positive cultural differences as well. The last statement, however, is the one that
struck me. By teachers refusing to use race labels or to acknowledge Black students’ unique experiences, we inadvertently send the message that White teachers do not value students of races other than our own. I can identify with this tangled web of race and how to talk about it.

As a teacher, I was much more comfortable using the term African American or fooling myself that I didn’t see race at all, until one day a student said, “Mrs. Wallace! Stop saying that!” I replied, “Stop saying what?!?” He exclaimed, “African American. We are not African American. We are Black. Why can’t you just say it?!?” He was right. I couldn’t. Even now, I feel that when I use the word “Black” as a race label, it gets caught in my throat—it comes out with a hesitant and unsure accent.

However, the use of hyphenated people groups such as African-American and Mexican-American presume that these individuals are less-than-American or else White immigrants would be acknowledged with the term European-Americans (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). Additionally, Helms (1990b) in her racial identity models, refers to “Black Americans” as those who have ancestors who lived in America during slavery and/or during the legal segregation of races, and those who immigrated post-Civil Rights legislation may have a very different experience of American life and often prefer the identifier African American. The participants in the study had similar sentiments—the two students who emigrated from Africa prefer the term African American, while the four who were born in America, prefer the term Black (see table 7).

In this manuscript, I will use the race term Black, unless referring to Sabrina or Layla who prefer the racial identifier African American. Not only am I honoring students’ preferences, but by using Black with a capital B and White with a capital W, I am acknowledging the culture and social ramifications tied to race, not just skin color. The use of the racial identifier Black works to respect my students’ and participants’ wishes for their preferences to be honored, but it
is also to come to terms with my discomfort in using Black. More importantly, I needed to come to terms with the different, often negative, experiences that Black students were having in my very classroom. It also left me wondering if my students’ insistence that I use ‘Black’ was also a call to get with the program and stop pretending I didn’t see skin color. As Ladson-Billings (2009) poignantly explains, “If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs” (p. 37).

**Racial Incidents in the Classroom**

When Paley was assigned her first Black student, she was unequipped to deal with race talk in her classroom. In fact, in her memoir *White Teacher* (1979) she compiled a list of the incidents between students that left her anxiety-ridden and speechless. As she had been taught, she ignored these racial incidents between her students. When I began to teach, I took at a job at a school with a much higher population of Black students than Paley’s school had. And, I, too, embraced colorblindness and treated all of my students the “same.” I did this until my Black students woke me up from my colorblind slumber (there are even hashtags now depicting this phenomenon: #getwoke, #staywoke. Instead of racial incidents occurring between students, however, racial incidents were occurring between teacher (me) and student. Some of these racial classroom remembrances were seemingly insignificant, while some had serious ramifications. However, years later, I still think about these interactions and how uncomfortable they made feel—not because of any fault of the students, but because I was not prepared or knowledgeable enough to navigate these racial aspects of the conversations, and instead, ignored them.

_Camden, the student who requested that I refer to him and his classmates as Black rather than African American continued the discussion of “blackness” throughout the year by_
constantly trying to bait me into verifying that one of his friends had the darkest skin of the
friends group. Every time he engaged me with this conversation, I brushed it off, ignored it, or
told him to stop talking about gradations of skin color. I couldn’t help but notice that Camden’s
friend did have very dark skin, but reverting to colorblindness, I pretended that I didn’t see it nor
was it important. Another memory that Camden left me with was him shouting across the
classroom, “Mrs. Wallace, what’s up with the White girl breakfast?” when I walked into my first
period class with a coffee from Starbucks. I just blankly stared at him, for what seemed like a
long time, wondering ‘What does Starbucks coffee have to do with being White?’ Calling
attention to his and his friends’ Blackness and my Whiteness was disorienting for someone who
believed that she was living in a post-racial society.

One day when studying poetry, Ahmad problematized the literary trope of black or
darkness symbolizing evil, while white or lightness symbolizes purity. His concern was that
these symbols transferred to skin color. I assured him that I ‘understood’ his concern, but these
symbols had nothing to do with race, and I quickly dismissed his rather insightful critique of a
widely accepted literary pattern.

I also began to experience race talk in relation to my classroom expectations and
disciplinary practices. I worked hard to develop close relationships with my students, but at the
same time, I ran a very tight ship. Jaelen, was a student with an infectious personality. She was
well-liked and could talk to and befriend just about anyone. We had daily personal
conversations about our interests, funny happenings at school, and about things going on in the
classroom. We laughed together and worked hard alongside one another until she started to
break classroom expectations. After disciplining her, she refused to speak to me. I thought the
familiarity we had established made it hard for her to accept consequences I assigned her, but
she said I was disciplining her because she was Black. Honestly, I was at a loss for words. I tried to reach out to her every day for the rest of the year, but the damage was irreversible.

Similarly, in a Theatre Arts class I taught, I found myself constantly getting on to Ray about his disruptive behavior while his classmates were performing. One day, I finally sent him out of class and found myself, soon after, in a meeting with him, his mother, and the principal. He and his mother talked about his dreams to become an actor, and how I, as a White teacher, was a hindrance to him, as a Black student, and his future goals. The meeting ended with him being removed from my class.

Nate, an extremely accomplished multi-sport athlete, had visits from college basketball and football recruits weekly. Before any colleges could offer him scholarships, he had to improve his ACT score. As his ACT Prep teacher, his coaches approached me frequently asking about his ACT scores. Unfortunately, his scores were not improving, and he was putting very little effort into the class. Because I knew that his engagement in my class, or lack of, was directly tied to his college opportunities, I constantly pushed (well, nagged) him to work harder. What I intended as tough love, he perceived as racism and chose to move to an ACT Prep class with a different teacher.

The culminating moment was when one of my students put her fist in the air and yelled “Black Power” during a school assembly with parents and community members present.

Each of these incidents left me as a deer in the headlights, and every time, I was hit by the oncoming vehicle. Every time. Why? Because I pretended race did not matter, but I had a handful of brave students telling me how much it matters to them as Black students, as Black Americans, and as Black humans to be acknowledged as such. I think they also sensed my discomfort and were pushing me into territories that I feared, and instead of allowing my
students to teach me more about how to become a more racially literate person, I stayed in the comfort of my silence. These incidents, which I did not know how to navigate, left me with two of my students being removed from classes and two more who refused to talk to me. It was their choices to move to another teacher, but it was solely my fault. Yet, I still could not wrap my head around what was happening. I was at a breaking point.

Being called racist and experiencing rebellion based on race caused me to question my past relationships with my Black students. I characterized my past relationships as amicable and prided myself on treating Black students just like White students. I was very cautious of not adopting a deficit theory and welcoming and respecting a culture different than mine. Now, I wonder if my past students felt just like the students described above but did not feel comfortable enough to express it.

I also experienced frustration and anger at my own and my students’ races being so vividly highlighted in these struggles. Writing this now, I realize that the beginning of my journey was very self-centered. My questions revolved around ‘why me?’ rather than authentically looking at the experiences my students were having. Also, “It was clear to me that I was unable to mention color in the classroom” (Paley, 1979, p. 9). My students obviously weren’t; I was the odd one out. As Paley (1979) discovered, “Anything a child feels is different about himself and cannot be referred to spontaneously, casually, naturally, and uncritically by the teacher can become a cause for anxiety and an obstacle to learning” (p. xv). Instead, “the challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about” (Paley, 1979, p. xvi). Like Paley, I realized that my socialization into colorblindness and colormuteness (Pollock, 2014) was damaging my students’ trust of me as their teacher and their desire to engage in and learn what I
had to teach. While I was undergoing this internal struggle, the school I taught at was showing signs of struggle as well.

**Description of Creswell High School**

Creswell City Schools is a coveted place for teachers to work. Teacher pay is high—one of the highest in the state. Class sizes are small. The school is well funded. Innovated teaching strategies are encouraged. Administrative support is strong. Teachers are given autonomy in their classrooms. Emphasis on community and forming relationships with students is key. When I worked there, the high school was small; we enrolled about 550 students. I was very lucky to land a teaching position at the high school. The English Department that I was a member of only had five English teachers. The unique and positive characteristics of Creswell City Schools paired with athletic excellence not only attracted teachers, but it attracted students from other school districts. Approximately 25% of those students were out of district students and paid tuition to attend. And, the year I left, the construction of a new state-of-the-art Creswell High School was complete, and teachers and students moved into a brand new school that more-so resembled a college campus.

The larger county that Creswell is a part of is only about 3% Black/African American. Creswell city is about 15% Black/African American, and Creswell high school is about 30% Black/African American. Because of these demographics, CHS is known colloquially as a diverse school, but it enrolls a majority of White students and employs mostly White teachers. In the late 1960s, Creswell High School was integrated as the neighboring school designated for Black students closed. Community members, students’ grandparents, and even some teachers at CHS remember this event. The school and community has held several community events to commemorate and chronicle this event. Just as CHS is rich in resources, it is also rich in history.
When I began to work with pre-service teachers in schools in a neighboring district, I realized just how unique Creswell City Schools was and often wished my interns could experience teaching in a similar, if not the same, environment that I taught in. However, we were not immune to problems—that I am all too sure of.

**Simultaneous Discussion about Black / White Literacy Gap Crisis**

As a member of Creswell High School’s (CHS) (pseudonym) teaching faculty from 2005 to 2014, I sat through countless department, faculty, and district meetings that highlighted the ‘racial achievement gap’ between our White and Black students (see table 1). According to Lewis and Diamond (2015) the term *racial achievement gap*, “…refers to the disparities in test scores, grade point averages, and/or high school and college completion rates between white students and black and or Latino/a students” (p. 2). The meetings began with introducing teachers to this socially unjust problem, which honestly left me in shock. Just looking at our school’s average scores was blinding me to the fact that there were two populations of students that I was not serving. I often boasted about Creswell’s high test scores, but when those test scores were broken down, our Black and Economically Disadvantaged (ED) students were scoring much lower than their White and non-ED peers. The table below displays Creswell High School’s English II TCAP Achievement Data for its Black and White students. After the discrepancies in achievement scores were communicated to the faculty, our department was tasked with developing ways to increase Black students’ standardized test scores. Unfortunately, we did not come up with many options.

**Reaction to the gap narrative: Buying into it.** Our first mistake was to whole-heartedly, and uncritically, buy into the ‘racial achievement gap’. Looking at the English II data, our Black students were scoring over 20 percentage points lower than our White students. When
our English department met about what we could do to raise our students’ scores, we really did not, “…talk seriously together of how our own practices might undo achievement patterns that are racial” (Pollock, 2004, p. 170). Instead of examining our practices as teachers, we assumed deficiencies in the students. We cited reasons such as: the students don’t read enough, they don’t have enough support at home, they don’t care about school, or they don’t speak standard English. We did not really discuss that the tests are probably biased and favoring our White students nor that we may be promoting self-fulfilling prophecies of failure through stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). We didn’t consider that this gap is a symptom of educational debts that are owed to our Black students at the hands of slavery, Jim Crow, and the failed efforts of school integration (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Alexander, 2010).

Table 1

CHS English II TCAP Data: Percentage of Students Proficient and Advanced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When I began graduate school, I learned these assumptions were false and damaging. I wish I could say that I realized it then. Looking back, I understand that my students were trying to clue me into the fact that racial achievement gap was my fault, not theirs. Especially Amber…she was the loudest.

*At CHS, it was a tradition to have an awards assembly for the senior class at the end of each school year. In the gym, the senior class assembled in graduation style rows on the floor,*
the parents in the lower bleachers, and the faculty and 9th-11th grade students in the upper bleachers. Each year, the assembly grows longer and longer as our students are awarded various scholarships and awards and inducted into various societies, which invokes in the administration and faculty an overwhelming sense of pride, but a palpable restlessness in the rest of the student body. Scholarships are needs, academic, athletic, military, and character-based, and in a school that toes the line of Title 1 status and boasts a diverse socioeconomic student body, we know what life-changers and opportunity-givers these scholarships serve for many of our students.

While I was trying to contain the restlessness of my 11th grade ACT Prep class, one girl in particular (I’ll assign her the pseudonym Amber) was very purposefully and loudly cheering for any Black student who received an award and scoffing and laughing at any White student who received an award. I warned her many times to be respectful to her classmates and to lower the volume of her voice. I was growing more and more frustrated as she was becoming louder and more animated with this overtly racially charged behavior. But, I was almost frozen while thinking about what to do. One part of me wanted to remove her from the assembly, while the other part of me knew that if I did, we were going to cause a scene and be a further distraction. So, I gave her the teacher eye, put my finger over my lips, and mouthed “STOP!”

And then, she stood up, put her fist in the air, and yelled “Black Power!” I consulted with several teachers on what to do as I thought I was a staunch supporter of Free Speech. Over and over I heard the same thing. Write her up. Write her up. Write her up. I did, and our already very strained relationship shattered, and I lost her forever.

I now believe that the language she used, the words she chose, were representative of a discourse churning inside her. To Amber, “Black Power” meant something very different than it
did to me. To her, I think it showed pride in her fellow Black classmates receiving awards and an acknowledgement that hers, too, is an accomplished race; to me, with my limited views of The Black Panther’s militancy, I assumed it was a disrespectful and prejudicial statement.

In an Africana Studies course I took, I researched The Black Panther Party, particularly its educational platforms. Like all other Black Social Movements from covert attempts to acquire literacy skills during slavery to The Black Lives Matter movement of today, there has been a singular call for the integration of Black history and culture into public school curricula. Despite the media’s portrayal of the Black Panther Party as violent thugs, their first passion was supporting school children and promoting their success through breakfast programs and calls for curriculum change. In the Black Panther’s 10 Point Program (March 29, 1972 Platform), point number five reads:

We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else. (The Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008, p. 75)

The Black Panther Party articulated and promoted the Black Community’s insistence that propping up the youth and supporting their education is key to progress and integration and equality, and one way to accomplish this is to provide Black children with reflections of themselves in a very White school curriculum.

In Amber’s chant of The Black Panther’s rallying cry “Black Power,” was she sending a message that she could not find herself in her school’s current curricula? Did she feel invisible
in the various classrooms she learned in each day, especially mine? Nancy Larrick (1965) would argue yes. She wrote, “Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (Larrick, 1965, p. 63). Larrick referred to reading and books, but we can also extend this concept to broader learning and curriculum. Not only can children of color not find reflections of themselves in the curricula, David E. Kirkland (2013) claimed that this exclusion silences our Black students. And many of these students, as Amber did, reject the White power structure by disengaging in the classroom and/or literally using loud voices as to break the silence and be heard. Amber may have chosen both. Perhaps by refusing to put effort into my classroom assignments, by scoffing at White classmates winning awards, and by standing and yelling “Black Power,” Amber was engaging in a form of social protest against educational oppression, and I was just too blind to see it. This incident bothered me for the rest of the school year and into graduate school. I knew I had done something wrong.

The continual meetings at CHS about the ‘racial achievement gap’ and the incident with Amber at the awards assembly pushed me into the Disintegration stage of Helms’ White Racial Identity Model. In this stage, it becomes clear to individuals that, “…there are race-related moral dilemmas associated with being part of an unfairly advantaged membership group” as they are faced with mounting evidence that racism exists (Helms, 1990b, p. 10; Lawrence & Tatum, n.d.). The immersion into colorblindness ends and one begins questioning if what they were taught about race was true (Helms, 1990a). As a result, confusion about whether to, “acknowledge and attempt to resolve racial issues or avoid them and pretending that there are no such things” occurs (Helms, 1990b, p. 11). Individuals in this stage often experience sadness, guilt, and
denial at the hands of this new realization (Lawrence & Tatum, n.d., p. 2). With this new knowledge and personal conflict, a person’s behavior begins to change.

Amber’s fist in the air has become a symbol of my willingness to question and rethink my assumptions, actions, and beliefs of Amber as just another misbehaving Black student. I am now willing to view my actions through a different lens and consider these actions (or non-actions) as implicit in Amber’s behavior. Her fist in the air has also become a symbol of what I hope my life’s work will become--increasing teachers’ racial literacy, their knowledge about culturally relevant pedagogy, and how to make their classrooms and curricula more inclusive and racially responsive for all students.

Within the scope of this study, I hope to honor Amber’s protest in three main ways:

- By looking critically at the literacy program that CHS created in reaction to learning about the ‘racial achievement gap’
- By centering students’ voices about their own literacy practices and their opinion of CHS’ literacy program
- By sharing my journey—even the ugly parts—about becoming a more racially literate White person to possibly help others begin their journey

Moving forward, it is important to keep in mind that the ‘racial achievement gap’ is not an indicator of student deficiencies, but of pedagogical and curricular deficiencies, historical ramifications, and structural inequities. Just as race is a social construct, the ‘achievement gap’ has been manufactured by educational stakeholders. They both still need to be deconstructed in order to take away their oppressive powers.
Leaving CHS and Entering Graduate School

I would like to say that I did extensive research on Culturally Relevant Education (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) and completed an action research project examining the impacts of *Creswell Reads* on my students’ literacy practices; but instead, I escaped to graduate school.

Over the years, I stayed in touch with my advising professor of English Education, and after speaking to one of her English Education classes, we caught up over coffee while she tried to persuade me to return and earn my PhD in Teacher Education. My immediate reaction was no. I had a 3-year-old at the time, and we definitely could not afford losing a salary and paying tuition for PhD level classes. She assured me that I would earn a Graduate Teaching Position covering my tuition and paying me a small stipend. My reaction was still no. I knew I wanted to earn my PhD, but I had in mind in 15 years when my son was out of the house and we were more financially established. Looking back, I think these excuses were also used as a way to cover up the tension I was feeling about not being a culturally relevant educator.

After the meeting, I spoke with my husband and my mother…their immediate reactions were, “Yes!” I spoke with a few of my colleagues, and their immediate reactions were, “Yes!” Still, I was resolved to not pursue a position in the graduate school. This was not something I wanted to put my family through; plus, I was not finished teaching high school. I loved teaching, even though this inability to discuss race in my classroom was becoming debilitating. As the list of racial incidents was growing, I began to question my ability to teach ALL of my students. My ineptitudes were not fair to the very students who needed teachers to help pay back their educational debts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I’ve never admitted this, but I finally agreed to go to graduate school because I honestly felt like I was damaging my Black students’ educations. I needed to push the reset button and bolster some of my skills.
I knew these thoughts and feelings of ineptitude that kept me up at night weren’t going away, so I decided to face them head on in my course work. The first two classes that really began to shape my thinking were an English class on neo-slave narratives and an English Education class on multi-cultural young adult literature. Quickly, I learned how I had been implementing a White normative curriculum.

As I began to learn more about how African American students disengage from school due to an absence of inclusion of their culture into both the curriculum and the disciplinary expectations of school, I began to turn a critical eye toward Creswell Reads, a program that I helped to create. While the program was born out of a mandate to close the Black/White literacy gap, I realized the five books (I was involved in choosing three of these) chosen so far were written by White authors and included mostly, if not only, White characters. If students need to see themselves in the curriculum to engage more, the literacy team should have been choosing more multicultural texts, since that was the population of students we were trying to cater to.

**Creating a Common Read**

As a result of individual departments’ silence on how to close the literacy achievement gap, the central office informed its principals that the system had to choose a reading program in order to decrease the gap. Knowing that pre-packaged, for-purchase literacy programs had very little effect on students’ authentic literacy abilities (Allington & Cunningham, 2007), the testing coordinators and high school principals proposed that the administration and faculty of CHS create its own reading program rather than purchase a prepackaged one. After a literacy team was created consisting of teachers from every subject area including Special Education, an administrator, and a librarian, we settled on a ‘School-wide Summer Common Read’ and called it *Creswell Reads* (CR). I was a member of the literacy team from 2012-2014 and was directly
involved in its conception and implementation. The common read program, *Creswell Reads*, would include one young adult novel, and over the summer, every student in the 9th-12th grades would be required to read it. When school resumed in the fall, each student would be tested over the novel and engage in a variety of projects and activities in different classes. *Creswell Reads* has been in place since 2012, and so far, five young adult novels have been studied school wide.

**My Account of the Structure, Purpose, and Implementation of *Creswell Reads***

Through reflecting on the creation of this literacy initiative and member checking with my previous CHS colleagues, I identified eight distinct steps we went through to create *Creswell Reads*:

1) Providing a Justification for *Creswell Reads*

2) Researching How to Implement a Common Read

3) Organizing *Creswell Reads*

4) Choosing the Book

5) Revealing the Book

6) Distributing the Book

7) Teaching the Book

8) Addressing Challenges

We completed steps one and two the first year, while steps three through eight were repeated each year. Each step works synergistically in order to create a continually evolving program. As the program ages, the structure tightens and becomes more organized, and its implementation informs changes that need to be made in the future. Below is a brief description of each of the steps and the challenges that we faced within each step.
**Step 1: Justifying *Creswell Reads***. Our main justification for a common read was to save ourselves and our students from an online, computerized reading program. After being faced with the daunting task of closing the ‘racial achievement gap’ by increasing our Black students’ literacy scores, the assumption we arrived at was that students were not reading enough. Our advanced readers were reading in the summer, so why not extend that expectation to all students? We hoped that requiring students to read a common book would create a reading community with a common thread, would turn students on to reading and engage reluctant readers, would increase student performance in all subject areas by increasing reading comprehension and vocabulary skills, and would build excitement around reading. Looking back, that is a tall order for any one literacy program, or book, to fill.

While these justifications were similar and loosely connected to the original purpose, we quickly lost sight of why we began this initiative in the first place. In fact, I never remember discussing our Black students’ literacy practices any further. We used it as a program justification, but did not use it to help us make decisions while creating and implementing the program.

**Step 2: Researching how to implement a common read.** Since the research is scant on common read implementations in high school, the literacy team depended on the librarian’s experience of implementing a common read program at her previous middle school and on my one-year experience with involving my classes in The National Endowment for the Arts’ *The Big Read*. The website, *One School, One Book* (readtothem.org) and a local community college’s website provided some very basic information. We soon decided that CHS was paving the way for the implementation of a common read in a high school. While it was neat to have a hand in creating a relatively new literacy initiative, it was also time-consuming and stressful. At times, I
felt like we were making things up as we went along. The initiative was also organized and implemented by a group of teachers, teachers who taught full class loads, coached sports, sponsored clubs, and served on various other committees. We were not awarded any extra time to implement *Creswell Reads*, and I think this negatively affected our ability to do more research.

**Step 3: Organizing *Creswell Reads***. The next order of business was to establish a committee in charge of implementing *Creswell Reads*. For CHS, it was a literacy committee or literacy team (the participants used these terms interchangeably). The literacy committee began with the English department, the librarian, and an administrator. Four years later, a voluntary member from every department, including Special Education, had been added totaling almost 20 members. It was important to the English department that the faculty and students did not see this literacy initiative as an “English thing,” but as a collective, schoolwide initiative. Also, I think it would have been imperative to take stock of the racial makeup of the committee. I do not think that we had any Black faculty members serving on the committee. This is not surprising, however, because we only had one to two Black teachers on staff. Regardless, we should have asked Black community members and/or parents to join us and to help us make decisions.

On average, the literacy team typically meet once a month in order to implement the remainder of the 5 steps (choosing the book, revealing the book, distributing the book, teaching the book, and addressing challenges). The implementation of *Creswell Reads* at CHS is a teacher-driven initiative. In conversation with the principal, he viewed his role as supporting and fostering *Creswell Reads* rather than making decisions about it. Instead, all decisions are left to
the literacy team, and it is their responsibility to lead and drive *Creswell Reads*. However, a more visible presence of administration may have helped with buy-in from the rest of the faculty.

**Step 4: Choosing the book.** Choosing one book for every student to read is the most difficult, time consuming task; it requires the literacy team to narrow the universe of choices. Each year, 5,000 to 6,000 children and young adult novels are published (Cooperative Children’s Book Center; S. Groenke, personal communication, October, 2015). The universe of books from which to choose is vast. Throughout the year, the librarian and literacy team members search for possible titles for *Creswell Reads*. For each title suggested, the librarian buys a copy, and the books are available for any literacy team or faculty member to read. Books that have potential to be ‘the one’ are placed on a short list. Once the list has six to ten titles, the literacy team is required to read all titles. The literacy team then meets and whittles the list down to three or four, and then meets again to compile a pro and con list for each book. Often after much heated discussion, the book is finally chosen.

After reflecting on each of the five novels chosen so far (see table 2), teachers agreed that the novels they tend to choose are young adult novels with middle or high school characters overcoming a challenge. The story lines are realistic (with the exception of *Variant*) and offer students roadmaps for coping with topics such as parental loss and physical limitations. Each novel chosen was published within a few years so as to reduce the chance that students have already read it, nor had the book choices been made into movies, so as to cut down on students watching rather than reading (two of the books—*A Monster Calls* and *Wonder*—were later made into movies). The table below (table 2) includes *Creswell Reads* book choices (2012-2017), the genre of each book, and a brief description.
Another factor to consider is readability level. The book has to be accessible for 9th through 12th graders spanning all literacy abilities. It is also important to consider aspects of the book such as language, sexual content, and violence. While many students are mature and ready to handle more controversial topics, the school also has to balance what students want and what their parents and more conservative faculty approve of. Also, as the literacy team considers titles, it focuses on how each content area will be able to relate to it. If a title is up for consideration, but no one can think how the Math department could use it in its curricula, the book is rejected.

Most committee members, including me, agree that there are too many books to choose from, and the process becomes drawn-out and oftentimes conflict-ridden. Once the books are reduced to three to five choices, most members on the committee do not read all the choices; therefore, there is a lack of fidelity when it comes to voting.

The committee is also faced with censorship concerns—it cannot pick a book with too much cursing or violence, any sex, or any diversity such as LGBTQ content for fear of push back from parents or other faculty members. Unfortunately, these are the books that many students are attracted to. In fact, on one of the open ended ‘rate this book’ questions on the assessment, one student said she would like to read a book with a queer character. The librarian also takes book suggestions from students but says most are not appropriate enough—not in her opinion but in the larger school community’s opinion. Therefore, many students have complained that the books are better fit for younger audiences.
Table 2
*Creswell High School’s Common Read Book Choices (2012-2017)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Publication Date</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td><em>A Monster Calls</em></td>
<td>Patrick Ness</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Fantasy, Illustrated</td>
<td>Middle school boy facing the loss of his mother to cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td><em>Wonder</em></td>
<td>R. J. Palacio</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Boy with Treacher Collins Syndrome adjusting to middle school life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teen Fiction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td><em>The Running Dream</em></td>
<td>Wendelin Van Draanen</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>High school track star adjusting to life after the loss of her leg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teen Fiction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td><em>Variant</em></td>
<td>Robison Wells</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Dystopian</td>
<td>High school boy enters his new boarding school to discover his classmates are andriods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td><em>We Should Hang Out Sometime</em></td>
<td>John Sundquist</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Memoir</td>
<td>Adult realizes he has never dated anyone and tracks down the girls in high school to see what went wrong</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Critically important is the lack of racial diversity in the book choices. It is imperative that we focus our literacy improvement efforts of those scoring on the bottom of the gap, rather than focusing on those on the top (Allington, 2015). On the top are our White, non-economically disadvantaged students. However, an analysis of the books that Creswell Reads has chosen are all by White authors and include mainly White, middle class students. According to Bishop (1990) and Myers (2014), African American readers lack of access to African American authors and characters can further damage their self-concepts as readers.

**Step 5: Revealing the book.** Once the book has been chosen, the librarian and several literacy team members work to organize the ‘big reveal’. The ‘big reveal’ takes place during a specially scheduled activity period. A Power Point introducing the book is created and shown to all students. The Power Point is visual and creative and includes background information on the author, a video style book trailer, and a synopsis of the story. After the reveal, students are often very curious about the book. A treasure hunt is also launched where the students answer questions about the book by scanning QR codes. The students who participate turn in their completed answer form to the librarian, and a drawing takes place in which several prizes are given, including copies of the book.

The librarian calls the reporter for the local newspaper, and he attends the big reveal. He interviews and photographs students and faculty members and publishes a piece on Creswell Reads’ book choice for the next school year. Much like NEA’s The Big Read, it has become a source of community interest—we even have teachers from other schools and community members calling to inquire about the newly chosen title.

**Step 6: Distributing the book.** Once the book has been chosen, it is imperative to open as many avenues as possible to get the books in the hands of the students before school dismisses
for the summer. CHS’ website is updated to announce the new title for *Creswell Reads* so that parents are aware. The librarian contacts Amazon.com and local book stores and works out a discounted price for the book for students. The CHS library orders several copies for students to check out; however, the library is closed during the summer. CHS donates several copies to the nearby MLK center, which services many CHS students after school and during the summer. The librarian also makes sure that one of the head football coaches has a copy, and he passes it around to as many players as he can during summer practice.

Students are urged to communicate with teachers, counselors, or principals if they cannot afford the book, and CHS and/or the district’s Student Resource Center purchase extra copies for those students. If the students choose not to read the book, we want to make sure it is not because they could not afford the book or did not have access to it.

**Step 7: Teaching the book.** Besides choosing the book, teaching the book seems to be the most important step in this process. Once the literacy team chooses the book, we begin researching ways that each discipline can address the book. The team looks online for study guides, projects, and discussion questions to share with the faculty. During back-to-school in-service sessions, time is devoted for each department to meet and discuss ways that it can incorporate the content and the themes of the book into its respective disciplines. The literacy team also feels like holding the students accountable for reading is a high priority.

After the book is revealed and distributed, the literacy team begins developing an assessment for all students to take. This is not meant to be a punitive piece but a simple way to hold students accountable, as students’ test grades count in every class. The test is comprised of multiple choice and short answer reading comprehension and recall questions, open-ended quote significance questions, and is followed up by a short section for students to rate the novel.
During the first few weeks of the semester, all classes are required to devote time to integrating the book into their respective curricula. For example, in Patrick Ness’ *A Monster Calls*, a boy is haunted by his worst nightmare in the form of a tree. The Fine Arts students were tasked with creating a sculpture of their monsters, or their worst fears, and met on a Saturday to have a bonfire to burn their sculptures to symbolize letting go the students’ fears and nightmares. In Wendelin Van Draanen’s *The Running Dream*, a high school track star loses her leg in a car wreck and has to learn how to walk, then run, and then compete on a running prosthesis. The physics class engaged in a research based unit on the physics of prosthetic limbs. With Robison Wells’ novel *Variant*, an English class engaged in close reading and text dependent questioning to introduce skills that the students would use throughout the semester, while a History class analyzed the social structure present in the novel.

Engagement with the book has even spread to various school clubs. Last year, CHS students read Robison Wells *Variant*, in which the students at Maxfield Academy often play paintball. Various clubs came together to organize a Saturday afternoon paintball tournament. The principal hopes that with increased funding, he can bring in the books’ authors to speak with students and to fund field trips to places like prosthetic factories or to doctors’ offices as reflected in *The Running Dream*.

**Step 8: Addressing challenges.** While there are obvious challenges with the implementation of the common read such as agreeing on a book, eliciting student and teacher buy-in, and keeping the program alive through administrative and teacher turnover, the most important challenge we need to address is losing sight of the purpose of the program—to increase our Black students’ literacy abilities. More importantly, the challenge is to change the program’s goal to cater to those abilities. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), ‘the
achievement gap’ is not the problem; rather it is a symptom of the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debts that American society owes to Black and Brown peoples. Therefore, focusing on the ‘achievement gap’ between Black and White students produces short term effects. It is not a mere gap in scores that need to be addressed. It is the repayment of the educational debt that is owed to the very students that only 300 years ago were forbidden to learn to read and write (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Looking back, I realize that creating Creswell Reads was a collective literacy team venture into Helms’ (1990a; 1990b) Reintegration stage. In this stage, the feelings of guilt and denial experienced in the Contact stage often turn to anger and “victim blaming” in order to avoid dealing with issues of racism and one’s personal responsibility to become anti-racist (Lawrence & Tate, n.d.). According to Helms (1990a),

Race-related negative conditions are assumed to result from Black people’s inferior social, moral, and intellectual qualities, and thus, it is not unusual to find persons in the Reintegration stage selectively attending to and/or reinterpreting information to conform to stereotypes of Black people. (p. 60)

Evidence of this can be found in comments and beliefs from some of the teachers that our Black students didn’t read enough or they didn’t try hard enough or their families didn’t care about education enough. We never examined our own practices to see if our teaching practices or curricula had a negative effect on our students of color, nor did we consider that the standardized test scores that produce the ‘racial achievement gap’ may be biased. As Helms suggested above, we were selectively attending to and reinterpreting information to shift the blame of ‘the achievement gap’ onto the students. As a result, we created a literacy program that recycled
stereotypical beliefs about Black adolescent readers instead of creating a literacy program that considered their individual needs.

As a result, this study is devoted to side-lining what White teachers think about their Black students’ literacy practices and competencies and, instead, highlighting students’ insights into their own educational experiences as Black readers and students. I am not positing that White teachers are “…bad teachers. These are the very same people that decry racism; they believe in equal opportunity. However, they do not understand that their perceptions of African American students interfere with their ability to be effective teachers for them” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 23). Oftentimes, White teachers believe they can help their Black students by raising their standardized testing scores, but literacy researcher Christopher Emdin adds, “you cannot 'save' a person of color if you cannot see them” (as cited in Lamiell, 2006, para 23). Unfortunately, amid all the standardized tests that students have been subjected to in the current policy context, “we have failed to connect to them in meaningful ways” (para 23). Emdin in no way implies that students of color need ‘saving’; this is more of an admission of the approach that many teachers take when attempting to remedy the ‘racial achievement gap’. The theoretical framework, participant experiences, and implications of those experiences that follow attempt to paint a rich portrait of Black readers rather than reducing these students to test scores.
Chapter Two: Questioning if Creswell Reads was Productive and Socially Just:

Forming a Theoretical Framework for Literacy

The first stage of Phase II of Helms’ (1990a) Racial Identity Model, Defining a Non-racist White Identity, is the Pseudo-independence stage and is the first step in reestablishing a positive White identity. The Pseudo-independence stage is a stage of “intellectualization” (Helms, 1990a, p. 61) in which, “an intellectual understanding of the unfairness of racism as a system of advantage and a recognition of the need to assume personal responsibility for dismantling it” occurs (Lawrence & Tatum, n.d., p. 3). When I began graduate school, I immersed myself in taking classes and reading literature that focused on the connection between race, racism, and literacy. Delineated below is my working theory of literacy that accounts for readers’ racial identifications as a result of the intellectualization that occurred during my experiences of the Pseudo-independence stage.

A Personal Theory of Adolescent Literacy

The simplest definition of “literacy” is the ability to read and write. However, much like Derrida (1976) explains, this single word hardly represents the complex concept that literacy has come to represent. Beers, Probst, and Rief (2007) call for a “re-vision of adolescent literacy” (p. xii). A theory of adolescent literacy must be comprehensive enough to encompass all adolescent readers, their sociocultural and racial contexts, their funds of knowledge, their schemas, the vast array of texts they may encounter, and the contexts in which they read them. In other words, a theory of literacy cannot be simple or one dimensional. The figure below layers three theories, one on top of another to begin to account for how a reader’s race potentially affects comprehension abilities and the desire to engage or disengage with texts.
My understandings of literacy are informed by these 3 bodies of research—sociocultural literacy theory, critical race theory, and racial literacy—and are still developing. Sociocultural theory informs my beliefs about adolescent literacy by acknowledging that students’ funds of knowledge, family beliefs, and school experiences all affect students’ literacy practices. Critical race theory allows me to look at student literacy practices that act as counter story to the dominant school discourse that often positions Black students as non-readers (Kirkland, 2013). In my research, I can look for ways in which young people are pushing back against deficit theories. Racial literacy helps to combine both sociocultural theory and critical race theory and asks questions like: How does race influence students’ literacy practices at school? How does race impact how they are seen as readers by their teachers and their peers? How does race affect how students experience being at and ‘doing’ school? Below is a definition, a brief review of the
literature of each body of work, a comparison of each theory, and a more detailed explanation of how each theory will inform my study.

**Sociocultural Literacy Theory**

Sociocultural theory works to explicate the connections between, “…how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical contexts…” (Scott & Palinscar, 2013, p. 1). Its origins lie in Vygotsky’s work, as he was interested in not only how children interacted socially with one another, but how these interactions are acts of encultration (Scott & Palinscar, 2013). I would argue, however, that this process is iterative. Not only are children’s social interactions and learning experiences acts of encultration, but their previous enculturations affect current and future learning experiences. In other words, not only do the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts of the learning setting affect how students learn, but the student’s unique sociocultural background (his/her cultural, institutional, historical contexts) also affects the student’s positionality as he/she approaches the learning situation.

As a result, sociocultural conditions in education are made up of the teacher’s, the students’, and the classroom’s sociocultural backgrounds and contexts (Ruddell & Unrau, 2013). Even though sociocultural theory began as an exploration into student interactions with one another, the teacher, and general learning tasks (Forman & Cazden, 2013), many literacy scholars have integrated it into their models of literacy (i.e., Ruddell & Unrau, 2013; Tatum, 2013; Gee, 2013, Kirkland, 2011). In fact, Gee’s (2013) main goal in “Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective” is to, “…situate reading within a broad perspective that integrates work on cognition, language, social interaction, society, and culture” (p. 136). Diverging from the emphasis on processing skills, Gee and other sociocultural theorists consider
how students’ schemas, funds of knowledge, discourses, and intersectionalities affect their comprehension and engagement with texts.

Sociocultural Literacy Theory marks a departure from, “…reading solely as a network of cognitive processes to a view of reading as a sequence of meaning-construction events capable of defining us, others, and our world” (Alvermann, Unrau, and Ruddell, 2013, p. 129). Reading is much more than a series of engagements with processing skills and tasks; instead, reading is an act that is embedded in an individual’s culture, social interactions, and discourses (Gee, 2013). Therefore, the collective reader is a myth, a convenient fiction (Rosenblatt, 1983). Instead, each individual approaches the task of reading a text with, “…an individual history, manifested in what has been termed a linguistic-experiential reservoir” (Rosenblatt, 2013, p. 927). According to Rosenblatt’s (2013) transactional theory, not only does every reader provide a different reading of a text as impacted by his or her sociocultural backgrounds, but when the same reader re-reads a text, an entirely new text is read, and therefore, created. This speaks to the potentially infinite amount of readers and their positionalities when approaching and re-approaching texts. A generic term such as “reader” will never be able to encompass the web of sociocultural factors or the “linguistic-experiential reservoirs” that affect the reading process.

According to literacy researchers Ruddell & Unrau (2013), each, “…reader’s sociocultural values and beliefs, which have their roots in the reader’s family, community, and to some degree, the school, influence both the decision to read and the reading goals” (p.1019). These multifaceted histories and beliefs that our students bring to the task of reading must be honored for them to remain engaged in the process and to see the value of literacy. However, “it is the teacher who frequently assumes major responsibility for facilitating meaning negotiation within the social environment of the classroom” (p. 1015). The more the teacher assumes the
role of meaning-maker, the less students’ sociocultural worlds are honored when approaching reading tasks. Ruddell and Unrau (2013), instead, provide a model (see appendix A) of how the reader and teacher come together in the context of classroom as they approach a text together.

This particular literacy model, “…requires that the teacher be attuned to student understandings of several types of meanings: text, setting, classroom structure, task, source of authority, sociocultural meanings, and classroom discourse” (Ruddell & Unrau, 2013, p. 1019). Unfortunately, as research has shown, most teachers are ill-equipped to navigate, honor, and leverage the sociocultural literacy webs of their students of different races.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory developed in the 1980s in the field of law when lawyers and scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado came together at a series of conferences to discuss the issues of racism within American law schools and courtrooms (Taylor, 2016). According to Bell, they need(ed) to, “…fashion a philosophy that both matche[d] the unique dangers [they] face[d], and enable[d] [them] to recognize in those dangers opportunities for committed living and humane service” (1992, p. 195). While CRT theorists recognize the permanence of racism, they urge followers to name and resist their oppressions and the, “…unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines in America” (Taylor, 2016, p.1). Later, Ladson-Billings and Tate applied this theory to the educational settings they worked in, in order to expose how these power structures are reinforced in the American Educational system (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

CRT is not an abstract body of ideas, but is driven by several agreed upon tenets whether it is applied to the field of law or of education. Even though the multiple tenets vary in scholarly
support, all CRT scholars are unified by, “two common interests—to understand how a ‘regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America’ and to change the bond that exists between law [and education] and racial power” (Crenshaw as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 20). Below is a compiled list of various tenets of CRT and their supporting scholars. This list is by no means comprehensive.

**Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

1. Racism is normalized and widespread in America (Taylor, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016).
2. The varied experiential knowledge of people of color should be acknowledged when analyzing society (Matsuda et al., 1993; Taylor, 2016; Bell, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016).
3. CRT is interdisciplinary in nature (Matsuda et al., 1993).
4. CRT seeks the elimination of racial oppression (Matsuda et al., 1993).
5. CRT acknowledges Whiteness as property (Rousseau, 2006; Taylor, 2016).
6. Intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class are acknowledged (Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2016).
7. Critique of liberalism and colorblindness is imperative (Rousseau, 2006; Bell, 2016; Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2010).
8. Interest convergence, or the tendency of Whites to support racial causes when it also benefits them, often prompts civil rights gains (Rousseau, 2006; Taylor, 2016; Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2010).
9. The notions of Racial Realism vs. Racial Idealism are defined and critiqued (Rousseau, 2006).
10. Voice/Counterstory/Storytelling/Revisionist History is restorative and illuminating to both the teller and the listener (Rousseau, 2006; Taylor, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Bell, 2016; Delgado, Stefanie, & Liendo, 2010).

11. Social Change/Resistance is an outcome of practicing CRT (Rousseau, 2006; Bell, 2016).


13. A vocabulary to discuss race is necessary (Delgado, Stefanie, & Liendo, 2010).

Most authors who write about CRT acknowledge all of the tenets but only pick three to five to focus on. In fact, the various tenets are not what align CRT scholars; instead, they “…seem grouped together not by virtue of their theoretical cohesiveness but rather because they are motivated by similar concerns and face similar theoretical (and practical) challenges” (Gentilli as cited in Bell, 2016, p. 35). The two main challenges CRT scholars face are naming and resisting oppression.

**Critical Race Theory in Education**

Educational researcher Ladson-Billings focuses on the following four tenets of Critical Race Theory: 1) Racism is endemic in American society, 2) Story telling is often used to provide context, 3) Liberalism, or colorblindness, is in need of critique, and 4) Interest convergence is to blame for Whites being the largest benefactors of civil rights reform (2016). The most crucial reason that CRT needs to be applied to education is because education is an institution that has silenced Black voices through curriculum exclusion, through master scripting, and through the dismissal of both Black teachers’ and students’ opinions on their own education (Swartz, 1992; Delpit, 1988).
As a literacy team, if we had more time to explore the literature on adolescent literacy, and if we had remembered that our focus was to cater to our Black students who we were underserving, I think that we would have made some important discoveries to base our decisions on. Perhaps we would have come across research that illustrated to us that the literacy deficiencies lie with White teachers’ instruction rather than Black students’ comprehension.

Many current literacy researchers (i.e., Gloria Ladson-Billings, Alfred Tatum, David Kirkland) are tasking educational stakeholders with troubling the gap discourse which presents Black students as deficient readers and instead focusing on the institutional structures that reinforce this depiction. According to Tatum (2013),

> The confluence of historical antecedents, social class, community membership, language, race, ethnicity, and gender; their interplay with institutional structures (e.g., schools and government); and the shaping of these institutional structures by educators and policymakers have contributed to a crisis in literacy education that is difficult to unravel.

(p. 616)

As a result of this knot of White normative structures in schools, Black adolescent literacy abilities (according to these institutional standards) are deficient and are seemingly trapped, “in an achievement-score quagmire” (Tatum, 2013, p. 619).

This view of deficiency and disengagement is both inaccurate and misplaced (Kirkland, 2011). In fact, “Youths are not failing to engage texts; many of the texts we teach in schools are failing to engage youth” (Kirkland, 2011, p. 201). The deficiencies, then, lie with educators and curricula rather than with student abilities. The inability or unwillingness to engage a majority of Black students with texts is made clearer though layering the three most applicable tenets of CRT over the perceived literacy crisis (Ladson-Billings, 2016). These three tenets include: 1)
Racism is endemic in American society, 2) Story telling is often used to provide context, and 3) Liberalism, or colorblindness, is in need of critique (Bell, 1980, 2016; Rousseau, 2006; Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

While Crenshaw, et al. (1995), define racism as a “…discrete and identifiable acts of prejudice based on skin color” (p. xv), Macpherson (1999), extends this definition to include detections of institutional racism. He writes that institutional racism, “…can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people” (p. 28). The racially biased literacy tests, which create racially biased literacy scores, are creating and reinforcing a narrative that Black students are deficient and/or disengaged readers. For educators, a prejudice against Black students is developing as illustrated by lowered expectations. During Tatum’s case study with Quincy, a Black, male, high school dropout, Quincy claimed that his classroom teachers did not offer as much support as he needed and asked for, and he, “…assessed this lack of support as a form of rejection stemming from teachers’ perceptions of African American students as worthless” (Tatum, 2013, p. 625). In fact, racism, as seen in adolescent literacy practices, manifests itself in educators’ tendencies to view their students as less capable or less worthy readers as based on the color of their skin.

Counterstory, or storytelling, is another important tenet of CRT. In literacy research, scholars applying CRT theoretical frameworks or methodologies are increasingly using students’ voices at the center of their writings. Like Quincy above, his narrative puts a human face on this otherwise theoretical issue. Similarly, David Kirkland (2013) centers four Black male adolescent voices (mainly Derrick’s) in his ethnography A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Black Males and uses their voices to help develop his literacy theories. Like Quincy, Derrick claims that
teachers’ exclusion of considering what Black male students might want to read is purposefully setting them up for failure (Kirkland, 2011). As many teachers push back against acknowledging the presence of racism in schools, centering student voices who experience it every day, especially in regard to literacy practices, makes it much harder to ignore and argue against. Also present in recent research, are counter stories of the plethora of ways that Black youth are literate and value literacy practices. For example, while working with Freedom schools, Groenke et. al (2011) found that African American adolescents can be successfully engaged, “…with reading and civic engagement, and that African American youth are indeed avid, passionate, skilled readers” (p. 30). While developing a schoolwide literacy initiative, it is important for me to consider actual student voices and to include positive portrayals of African American readers that act as counter stories against the dominant discourse.

One of the most important reasons CRT needs to be included in literacy research is because most research now is colorblind. According to Tatum (2013), “This dehumanizing and devaluing of the African American male [and female] adolescent is often overlooked by literacy models that are solely grounded in [colorblind] cognitive reading processes….Such models may inadvertently undermine African American [students’] meaningful engagement with texts” (p. 627). This colorblind view of literacy ignores that, “Minority children could have a handicap if stories, texts, and test items presuppose a cultural perspective that the children do not share” (Anderson, 2013, p. 483). So, when the failing literacy scores of African American students are discussed, it is important to remember that this is oftentimes a result of mis-matched schemas and values rather than comprehension failures (Anderson, 2013). For example, the books chosen by The Children’s Defense Fund for Freedom Schools, “…must meet the criterion of being affirming for black children and their culture” (Groenke, et al., 2011, p. 32). As a result, the
Freedom Schools summer program increases motivation and achievement in regard to reading (Groenke, et al., 2011).

Continuing to disregard race as an integral component to literacy experiences is to continue to promote colorblindness in the field of literacy research and practice. As a result, “These daily indignities take their toll on people of color. When these indignities are skimmed over in the classrooms that purport to develop students into citizens, it is no wonder students ‘blow off’ classroom discourse” (Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 23). Therefore, “…CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 17). It is imperative, while deconstructing Creswell Reads, to uncover pieces of the structure that are White supremacist and that promote a master narrative of White curriculum content and literacy needs.

Racial Literacy

Racial literacy, a term coined by Lani Guinier (2004), combines the tenets of Sociocultural Theory and Critical Race Theory in order to provide an, “…understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314). According to Twine (2010), there are 6 major components of racial literacy:

(1) the definition of racism as a contemporary problem rather than a historical legacy; (2) an understanding of the ways that experiences of racism and radicalization are mediated by class, gender inequality, heterosexuality; (3) a recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness; (4) an understanding that racial identities are learned and an outcome of social practices; (5) the possession of a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race,
racism, and antiracism; and (6) the ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practices.” (p. 92)

King (2016) in his outlining of racial literacy, adds two more components: (1) race and racism is constantly evolving, not static, and (2) the focus needs to be on systemic racist structures rather than individual acts of racism.

Racial literacy gives individuals “the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narratives of nations” (Guinier, 2004, p. 100). Instead of merely naming oppressions, it provides ways, through language, to navigate these inequities by identifying structural or systemic inequities that promote racism and disadvantage (Skerrett, 2011). However, racial literacy acknowledges both “individual agency” and, “…the institutional and environmental constraints on individuals’ actions” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314).

For individuals practicing racial literacy, “…race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment of conditions within society and people’s lived experiences” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314). The way that people of color are treated in society acts as a litmus test of that society’s commitment to equity (Harris-Perry, 2011). However, racial literacy also requires that individuals analyze not only the structural aspects of the relationships between race and power, but also the interpersonal aspects (Skerrit, 2011). It is imperative that Whites also turn inward and examine how they are contributing to the oppression of other races, whether overtly or inadvertently. Racial literacy requires individuals to use these insights to actively combat and work to tear down the webs of racism that plague our societal systems.

Racial literacy, in regard to adolescent literacy theory, involves understanding how race affects students’ literacy practices and how teachers’ textual choices and engagement strategies
can stifle or transform African American students’ literacy experiences. This understanding, then, needs to evolve into action. According to Mica Pollock (2004), “…we must harness our discourse on achievement a bit more knowingly” and “…actively denaturalize racial achievement patterns: to name them and claim them as things that we, together, have both produced and allowed” (p. 171). We can no longer fear discussing race and racism as it further exacerbates the problems of inequities in our schools by ignoring or justifying them rather than critically deconstructing them (Pollock, 2004).

The list below illustrates what I think racial literacy looks like in educational systems, especially pertaining to literacy.

- Addressing Diversity in the Classroom
  
  - Both teacher and students acknowledging that school is not set up for diverse populations to succeed (i.e., homogeneity of teaching population, behavior expectations, language biases, etc.) and developing a language to implicate that structure
  
  - Teaching students about White privilege, deficit theories, White norms, The Danger of the Single Story, Critical Lenses and how they play out in literary texts and the educational system at large
  
  - Examining curricula—content and expectations—for diverse voices, or lack of (which is more often the case)
  
  - Asking students whose voices are missing in texts and allowing/requiring them to fill in those gaps
  
  - Honoring diverse home languages as assets, not deficits
Allowing students choice in assignments, writings, projects, etc. to capitalize on personal strengths and interests while allowing their unique perspectives to be showcased

- Addressing Diversity in Literacy Research
  - Centering African American student and teacher voices in research
  - Questioning the truth/validity of the literacy gap that has resulted from standardized testing
  - Questioning appropriating Black Student Culture to engage African Americans in the classroom
  - Exploring the silencing of our diverse student populations in the classroom
  - Educating teachers on:
    - How to talk about race in the classroom
    - How to engage in Critically Relevant Teaching and Pedagogy
    - How to diversify curricula
    - How to avoid framing diverse voices as victims

Taking a Racial Idealist stance, as Critical Literacy calls for, allows educators and students to become literate in how race pervades every aspect of the educational system, particularly in literacy instruction. This new language can help both educators and students to see that talking about and accounting for race in educational processes can be a transformative practice.

**Connections and Disconnections Across the Theories**

Sociocultural Theory and Critical Race Theory form the basis of Racial Literacy. On the bottom of the pyramid lies the earlier and more general theory that provides a foundation for the more recent and more practiced-based theory sitting at the top of the pyramid. Sociocultural
theory is no more less important than CRT or Racial Literacy, but creates a foundation on which the other two theories can be built and further developed.

Figure 2. Foundations of Racial Literacy.

As the diagram progresses from top to bottom, the more active a stance the theory calls for. Sociocultural theory causes individuals to recognize the effects that students’ unique life experiences and sociocultural contexts have on learning situations. CRT adds to this recognition by requiring individuals to recognize race as one of the most impactful aspects of an individual’s sociocultural heritage. Finally, racial literacy is a result of these embodying the two previous theories in courses of action.

Connections

Examining the overlap of the tenets of CRT and Racial Literacy highlights the similarities in the two theories. Both theories uphold the ideas of racism as an endemic problem,
intersectionality as a basis of non-majoritarian experiences, Whiteness as property, and race as a social construct. Only Critical Race Theory speaks to intersectionality. Intersectionality and its multifaceted effects on an individual’s schema and his or her ability to navigate the world drives experience. Layering race on top of this idea creates a binary. On the one hand, there is Whiteness. Because Whiteness is normative, Whiteness is often invisible to those who possess it (Gillborn, 2016). People of color, then, are constantly reminded of their non-Whiteness as they attempt to navigate various social systems, whereas Whites are often oblivious to this dichotomy, therefore, adding rigidity to the already oppressive structures.

The concept of intersectionality, though, adds dimension to the Black/White dichotomy. Not only is race an oppressive (or liberating) force in people’s lives, but so is class, gender, sexuality, etc. The more oppressive forces one tacks on, per se a poor, Black, homosexual female, the more difficult it is to thrive in a White, middle class, heteronormative society. CRT and racial literacy add an important element of race to Sociocultural theory and works to blur the lines of race through intersectionality. This triad of theories all work together to explain an individual’s complex experiences of the world.

Disconnections

Divergent philosophies of White allies. One of the main disconnections between CRT and Racial Literacy is the belief of who can engage in the work. According to Barnes (1990), Whites, by their very nature, cannot engage in CRT work. Instead, those who use CRT methodology, “integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as ‘other,’ with their ongoing struggles to transform a world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony” (Barnes, 1990, p. 1865). This belief seems to be foregrounded by Freire’s (1970)
claim that the oppressor cannot fix the system of oppression; instead, only the oppressed can rise up, tear down, and restructure the system.

Also, one of the most important tenets of CRT is the illuminating and restorative act of storytelling. According to Delgado, “Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation…as a means of psychic self-preservation…and…as a means of lessening their own subordination” (1989, p. 2436). While, “the story gains psychically, the listener [gains] morally and epistemologically” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). In storytelling, and within the larger field of CRT work, members of the majoritarian race are faced with an opportunity to listen and to learn from the outgroup. Action from Whites is not desired, but instead inaction—an opportunity for Whites to sit and hear counter stories and let the message of the narratives begin to make visible the invisibility of White privilege.

Racial Literacy, on the other hand, calls upon Whites to engage in CRT work. In fact, in Twine’s (2010) seminal work *A White Side of Black Britain*, she claims that, “…Whites have been neglected as sources of antiracism…” (p. 113). Within the context of transracial families, Twine identified White mothers who she perceived as racially literate. These women usually had decided to engage in racial literacy projects such as working for antiracist organizations. These experiences allowed them to monitor their whiteness while teaching their children about racial literacy and how to better navigate the chasm between the White and Black worlds. Because of these women’s unique positions of White mothers with Black spouses and bi-racial children, they, together with their families, “…can learn to develop a critical analysis of how race and racism operate in their lives…and learn to distinguish between their whiteness and white supremacy as a racial project, an ideology, a line of vision, and a position of structural advantage that is affected by the interrelated variables of class, gender, generation, sexuality, and
locality” (Twine, 2010, p. 115). Since the majority of the teaching force is White, it is important to enlist them in anti-racist causes, especially in their own classrooms.

**Racial realism vs. racial idealism.** These divergences in thought highlight another difference: one of Racial Realism versus Racial Idealism. While CRT discusses both Racial Realism and Racial Idealism, many CRT scholars like Bell, uphold a belief of Racial Realism. Ledesma and Calderon explain that “…while CRT offers us a strong lens to identify institutional racism it does not offer remedies and instead promotes bleak and pessimistic views of potential change” (2015, p. 219). Racial Realism claims that racism is more than an unfavorable view of races; instead “…racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 21). Since CRT upholds that racism is an endemic and permanent facet of society, racism is not going to be erased. Instead, racial hierarchies will continue to, “…determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best education…”, etc. (Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 21). While CRT scholars agree that racism is never going to be erased, they still promote resistance against those structures (Bell, 1980).

Racial Literacy, on the other hand, upholds a more restorative view—one of Racial Idealism. Since, “…racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse…” these modes of thought and speech can be undone (Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 21). We can learn to change, “…the system of images, words, attitudes, unconscious feelings, scripts, and social teachings by which we convey to one another that certain people are less intelligent, reliable, hardworking, virtuous, and American than others” (Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 21). Racial Literacy theorists rely on Discourse as the major transformative tool of racism. Anti-racist vocabularies consist of the possession of CRT terminologies such as White privilege, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, etc. as well
as possessing in-depth knowledge of racial histories that are often left out of school curricula. Tizard and Phoenix (1993) and Twine (2010) found that individuals who had a working Racial Literacy discourse were able to name and navigate and resist oppression more-so than those who did not. This view of ideally changing views of race for the better in ourselves and in others is the basis of Racial Literacy.

**Conclusion: Deconstruct to Reconstruct**

Even Derrida explains that it is extremely difficult to describe what Deconstructionism is; however, he once provided a very helpful analogy (Smith, 1998; Derrida 1997). Deconstruction is cracking open the proverbial nutshell and examining or disturbing what is inside (Derrida, 1997). Rather than using the term Deconstructionism as annihilation, Derrida claims it is an “anti-structuralist gesture” as structures are meant, “…to be undone, decomposed, and desedimented” (Derrida, 1985, p. 2). In order to crack open, or to undo, the proverbial nutshell, literary critic Barbara Johnson (1987) explains that, “What deconstruction does is to teach you to ask: ‘What does the construction of the bottom line leave out? What does it repress? What does it disregard? What does it consider unimportant? What does it put in the margins?’” (as cited in Salusinksky, p. 81). Pairing Critical Theory with Deconstructionism helps to answers Johnson’s questions.

Critical Theory’s central focus is *critique*; it, “…entails examination of both action and motivation…”[and]…includes both what is done and why it is done” (Budd, 2008, p. 175). It also mainly deals with the conditions in which people live (Budd, 2008). One’s literacy abilities are an important part of his or her living conditions; therefore it is imperative to crack open the White normative structures upheld in American schools and society in order to examine how these structures affect students’ literacy practices. Critical Theory, however, deals mostly with
Historical and Marxist lenses, but this literacy theory calls for an inclusion of Critical Race Theory since an individual’s race is an inseparable facet of his or her identity, and, therefore, has an impact on literacy practices.

Literacy is not just decoding words on a page; instead, it is reading the word and the world as a means to transform the reader’s life and social conditions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). More importantly, this implies, that illiteracy is not just the inability to read and write, but it is an injustice that “…has consequences, such as the ability of illiterates to make decisions for themselves or to participate in the political process…[and] undermines the democratic principles of a society” (Friere & Macedo, 1987, p. vii). This definition takes a radical stance and upholds the belief that literacy is a means to self-empowerment, while illiteracy results in repression and domination (Giroux, 1987, p. 2). To me, it is clear that increasing a person’s literacy can emancipate him/her from social ills such as poverty and marginalization. The key word here, however, is can. It is imperative to critically deconstruct why some students experience this transformative power of literacy while some do not.

If we knew these things 6 years ago, I think the steps of *Creswell Reads* would have played out much differently. Just as my readings in my PhD courses helped me to patch together this series of aha! moments into a theoretical framework, my qualitative research courses allowed me to begin exploring *Creswell Reads* a bit more formally, and eventually, critically. As a class project, I designed an instrumental case study aiming at explaining the inception, organization, and implementation of *Creswell Reads*. In order to do so, I used semi-structured interviews of three of my past colleagues directly involved in the summer reading program. Even though I was there for the whole process, I designed a series of questions that would help me recreate the story of *Creswell Reads*. 
While I amassed data, I was puzzled why none of my participants recalled or mentioned the Black/White literacy gap unless I prompted them to do so. I carried on with the interviews, the coding, and the reporting. It wasn’t until my comprehensive exam defense that others, my committee, were puzzled at this as well. In fact, one of my committee members asked, “What? They forgot that the whole point of this reading initiative was to help the Black students?”

I felt the same way, and that was the moment that I agreed that the focus of my dissertation needed to shift. Outlining and detailing the ins and outs of a high school common read was hardly the issue I wanted to discuss. I wanted to explore why so many teachers, including me, are ill-equipped to teach our students of color. And, if we were busy creating a literacy program that we thought would motivate kids to read, why not actually ask them? Paley (1989), in her epilogue to White Teacher, advises, “The children have much to teach us, if we but stop and listen” (p. 142).
Chapter Three: Designing a Study to Explore Creswell Reads, my Racial Identity Development, and Black Student Literacies

The purpose of this study is to examine how Creswell Reads addresses, or has the potential to address, the literacy practices and needs of Creswell High School’s Black students. The study also parallels my racial awakening to the exploration of how to make a local school’s literacy initiative—one I had a hand in making—more student centered and racially conscious. I helped to implement this literacy program before I realized that many American classrooms, including mine, were ostracizing students of color yet wondering why these same students were underachieving in terms of standardized test scores. The research questions this study will explore are

- How do Black students at CHS respond to a school-wide, common-read initiative intended to close racial disparities in achievement?
- How do Black students at CHS see themselves as readers?
  - Are they motivated, engaged readers?
  - What are they currently reading on their own?
  - How do they see themselves as readers both in- and out-of-school?
- How does race factor into Black CHS students’ reader identities and experiences as readers at school?

Methodologies

Action Research

Historically, action research developed out of a resistance to positivist, Modern thought. Early theorists included John Dewey, John Collier, Kurt Lewin, and Stephen M. Corey who aligned themselves with interpretivist epistemologies. While Collier and Lewin were known as
the founders of action research, it was Corey who was credited with moving action research from the social sciences into the realm of education (Hinchey, 2008). The popularity of action research began to wane while the government began pumping money into “hard” scientific educational research, which became the Gold Standard (Hinchey, 2008). However, action research’s popularity was revived in the 1960s and 1970s by contemporary theorists such as Lawrence Stenhouse and Paulo Freire. While the early theorists created a more practical version of action research, the later theorists devoted themselves to making action research emancipatory.

Action research in school settings mirrors what teachers do in their classrooms every day, just in a more systematic way; it is “…used by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting, their teaching and the learning of their students” (Creswell, 2008, p. 62). When a teacher identifies a problem in his or her classroom, he or she develops an action plan to solve or improve the problem and then analyzes the results. It is research conducted by insiders of a school or community (rather than outside researchers) and is conducted alongside the school and/or community members (Hinchey, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Action research is often cyclical in that, “…one step leads to another over and over in a continual improvement process. The end segment of any cycle frequently generates the first segment of the next one” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 5). Below, is an illustration of a cycle example outlined by Hinchey (2008):
The teacher or community insider conducting the research determines the problem, the action plan, and the goals of the action research project. According to Hinchey’s (2008) *Action Research Primer*, action research should involve a sharing component whether it is through leading an in-service session or writing an article. This type of action research is practical in that it has improved a local, practical problem and has produced increased craft knowledge in the teacher (Hinchey, 2008). It combines action with theory, reflection, and practice. It is produced in combination with others to provide practical solutions to pressing issues (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In this study my “problem” was that at Creswell High we created a literacy program.
aimed at closing the Black/White achievement gap, but did not consider the literacy lives and needs of the students we were trying to support. This led me to my main “concern”: How do teachers improve literacy instruction and larger educational experiences of students of color?

Some action research is emancipatory in nature; “...emancipatory action research is inherently about freedom. More specifically, it is about freeing people from limitations they’ve unconsciously accepted because they aren’t in the habit of asking if things must be the way they are” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 41). The goals of emancipatory action research are to uncover political issues behind the research problem and to develop an action plan that seeks to promote equity by disrupting power imbalances. Emancipatory action researchers believe that merely changing an educator’s practice is not going to solve most educational problems, but rather it is imperative to search for systematic bias and to seek the answers to questions such as: Who has the power in this situation? How do they use that power? Who benefits from and who is harmed by that power? (Hinchey, 2008). It is important and necessary to question every element of a situation in order to find answers to these questions (Hinchey, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Hence, many of the questions on the surveys and in the interviews and focus group center on the participants’ experiences as readers and students of color and allowed them to explore their experiences of structural racism within their own school.

Perhaps most significant is the inclusion of the students or the participants in the research. Emancipatory action researchers consult students because they are engaged in, “…a democratic process that stresses giving voice to those affected by decisions” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 42). An action researcher’s objective can also be to, “…empower, transform, and emancipate individuals in educational settings” (Creswell, 2008, p. 62). Emancipatory action research facilitates greater equity and expects for change to seep into the larger community and/or society.
This study centers six Black students’ voices about their individual engagement with Creswell Reads, their individual literacy practices, and their individual experiences as Black students at CHS, and their individual suggestions for the betterment of their literacy education.

Action research is grounded in a participatory worldview (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It rejects objectivism as impossible since the action researcher is an active participant in the world he or she is studying. The action researcher does not come from a position of neutrality or disinterest but has a specific purpose in mind when undertaking the research project (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The very word action implies that we are actors and doers every day; action research allows us, “…to judge the quality of our acting” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 7). Action research allows the researcher to embrace his or her subjectivity and examine how he or she acts in the world. While the world does exist independently of us, our interactions are driven by our positionalities. Our theories about the world reveal, guide, and substantiate our actions (Macmurray, 1957). As an action researcher, I not only study a school-based ‘problem’, but I study my own engagement with it and reactions to it.

Stephen M. Corey’s (1953) *Action Research to Improve School Practice*, he, “…includes 6 conditions that promote the success of action research efforts that still offer valuable guidance: willingness to admit weakness, opportunity for creativity, opportunity to test ideas, cooperation among administration and staff, systematic data collection, and the time necessary to engage in the reflective process” (Schmuck as cited in Hinchey, 2008, p. 13). This aligns with Hinchey’s cycle provided above. A teacher in her classroom or a faculty member in his school holds insider knowledge about issues, dynamics, and politics that an outside researcher is unlikely to achieve. Unlike researchers who often collect data and run, teacher researchers remain in their schools and disseminate knowledge that they co-created during their research. If we want to
improve pedagogy and school-based initiatives, empowering teachers to become teacher researchers is integral to this transformation.

I have positioned myself as an action researcher because I was a faculty member at Creswell High School for nine years immediately preceding starting graduate school. I kept in touch with teachers, administrators, and still knew many of the students. When I entered CHS to engage in research, I was treated as a colleague, not as an outside researcher. I regularly had conversations with various faculty members about our lives, our careers, and my research. Also, the program I was studying, Creswell Reads, was a literacy program that I helped to create and facilitate. While I no longer teach at CHS, I believe the above reasons justify my stance as an action researcher. Additionally, the findings of my study will be presented to the literacy team and to building level and central office administration.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a combination of autobiographical writing and ethnographic research. Therefore, as a research method, it is both a process and a product (Ellis, 2008). Autoethnographic research presents itself so that it can be used rather than analyzed, told and retold, “offers lessons for further conversation,” and upholds, “…the companionship of intimate detail [over] the loneliness of abstracted facts” (Ellis, 2008, p. 50). Originating with Heider (1975) and Hayano (1979) in the field of anthropology, it has since moved into other social science fields, including education (Ellis, 2008; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). The shift of many researchers to authoethnography is connected to a departure from the view that researchers’ views of others are unproblematic; rather, many researchers are now concerned with “power, praxis, and the writing process” (Ellis, 2008, p. 48). Introspection and self-consciousness are showcased in order to display the balance of power between the researcher and
his or her participants throughout the research (Ellis, 2008) making autoethnography, “a politically, socially-just, socially conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1).

Because “…the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied” (Ellis, 2008, p. 48), autoethnography was created to,

concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 3).

Rather than naming personal subjectivities and sidelining them, autoethnographers seek to accommodate the personal experiences of the researcher and position themselves within their research. This falls in line with post-modernists, who reject sterile, authoritarian research (Ellis, 2008).

Autoethnographies are closer to literature than science, value stories over theories, and are value-centered rather than value-free (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). They are written in first person and often are written in prose form rather than in the form of a traditional research report. The writing is accessible, inviting the reader in rather than making the reader a passive receiver of knowledge and is a story in motion rather than a frozen moment in time. Autoethnographic writing and research often focuses on a single case while drawing attention to the universal (Ellis, 2008).

As a research process,
Autoethnography clarifies the purpose, question, problem, context, or issue being addressed by utilizing the self as a central foundation for inquiry. It makes contributions to either established or new knowledge and/or practical concerns by highlighting the individual’s understanding of existing structures, theory, and scholarship. Autoethnography includes reports of a study’s contribution to relevant scholarship, and it addresses existing theory, practice, methodology, and research results by highlighting the study of the self within a larger context. This self-study framing then considers the conceptual, methodological, or theoretical orientation of the study when considering the historical, linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds of the participants. The application of social science autoethnography begins with the comprehensive formulation of social problems. (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 212)

Many criticize autoethnography as a pseudoscience; however, as the above explanation illustrates, authoethnography shares research components with more traditionally accepted modes of research. The main difference is the added component of self-study.

**Pairing Action Research and Autoethnography**

Action Research and Autoethnography are logical methodologies to pair together. Action research privileges the researcher’s participation and positionality while autoethnography is an autobiographical journey into a research project. By using these two methods, I can simultaneously carry out an action research project in order to propose ways to make *Creswell Reads* more student centered and racially conscious while also making readers privy to my process of becoming a more racially literate educator.

According to Anderson and Herr (2005), many autoethnographic research projects evolve from self-study into “a form of action research” (p. 25). Since, “The action researcher is always
an insider who brings to the study an intimate understanding of the research context,” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 113) it is natural that the written report would include autobiographical elements in order to make these “intimate understandings” as rich as possible. Just as Anderson and Herr (2005) claim that autoethnography often naturally morphs into action research, Hinchey (2008) explains that action research reports must contain strong elements of authoethnographic writing in order to, “…use their familiarity with the context to help the reader understand the unique elements of the situation—to help the reader grasp how certain events actually felt to the people involved…” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 113).

Action research reports are written, “...like narrative essays where researchers report their experiences using a personal and informal tone, often speaking in metaphorical terms of their research adventure or journey” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 112). The more readable and creative an action research report is, the more accessible it is (Hinchey, 2008). Similarly, autoethnographers “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2010, para. 3). Action research and autoethnographies uphold the similar research goals and writing styles and are interpretivist in nature. Pairing these two methodologies together strengthens both making the findings richer and more trustworthy.

Autoethnographic elements are incorporated in two main ways in the manuscript. First, when a personal memory or experience is reflected upon or when I explain what I have learned from my participants’ words, I provide my thoughts in italicized text. This helps to visually separate more research-based concepts and writing from my personal experiences. Second, I chronicle my White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990a) throughout the manuscript. As I was prompted by my experiences to enter into the next stage, I explain that stage and my
personal understanding of it. I have learned that developing racial literacy and becoming a more racially responsive educator requires a great amount of personal reflection and self-work. I hope that making my invisible, internal struggle visible and external will prompt others to embark on the same journey.

**Subjectivity Statement**

Even though personal statements and reflections are woven throughout the manuscript, it is important to make a note about my own personal subjectivities in relation to this research project. I am a White, female researcher working with Black adolescent students. I am aware of the racial privilege that afforded me this position—both a researcher in a doctoral program at a large, well-respected state university and as a previous teacher at Creswell High School, which is a professional occupation that is overrepresented by White females. Getting access to these participants is in large part due to my White privilege and is something I thought about often. I often wondered how much access to the Black adolescent female participants’ experiences that I had, and how much they filtered out by my being White. Or, how my Whiteness could have misinterpreted my representation of their ideas and experiences.

Moreso, I wondered if I deserved access to their experiences at all. One question I asked in the focus group is whether or not the participants thought it was ethical for a White teacher-researcher to be asking them questions about their racialized experiences at school. Indigo agreed that it would be better if a there were also a Black researcher present, but the participants also agreed that I was genuinely interested in and respectful of their ideas and experiences and, as a White teacher, was in a position to reach more White teachers. Throughout the study, I made sure that I remained vulnerable and right-reasoned because of the great responsibility I had in representing these participants’ experiences.
Research Design

Mixed Methods

Over the past two years of course work, I aligned solely with qualitative research. As Hatch (2002) explained, many students find it difficult “...to see how breaking the complex world of classrooms and schools into supposedly discrete dependent and independent variables then running sophisticated statistical analyses actually reveal how much about what is actually happening or what really needs to be done” (p. 1). Instead, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Just as standardized test scores tell teachers very little about what learning has taken place or what instructional strategies work best, I believed quantitative research could provide me very little information on how to improve educational, especially literacy, practices.

While I was astonished at the amount of statistical analyses that programs like SSPS could perform, I was troubled when we were instructed to throw out the outliers of many of our data sets during an applied statistics in education course. Throw out the outliers? As a researcher, how could I paint a picture of a situation if I am throwing out data points—especially if these data points represent flesh and blood students? Instead, interpretivist methodologies like action research support negative case analyses, or examining the outliers in a set of data to examine significance (Hinchey, 2008). I also had aligned myself with deconstructivist and critical perspectives and did not see how quantitative research could afford me the opportunity to pursue these lines of inquiry.

However, during my comprehensive exam defense, it was clear to my dissertation committee (mainly my methodologist) that the research methods for my study were more in line
with program evaluations which usually employ quantitative research strategies. But, I was a qualitative researcher; as a result, whatever study I designed was, by default, a qualitative study. Because of this line of thinking, my whole research plan was called into question. When my committee suggested that I use mixed methods, I still resisted. I value case studies and interviews and field notes and memoing, not crunching numbers in SSPS. But, I was in denial that the surveys I had created had strongly quantitative elements, and my analysis was going to need quantitative analysis methods. I slowly began to realize that even though I claimed my study was qualitative, I was using strategies from both research types.

Looking back, it is odd that I clung to one research method over the other. When a question is posed in class about which literacy practice or theory is better--A or B--I always responded with neither and both. I never understood why we were faced with choosing one side when we could take the strengths from both sides and form a new choice becoming a researcher as bricoleur. I also believed we could serve more diverse students by combining theories and practices as one stance is rarely going to serve all students. Similarly, I have come to believe that combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies will allow me to take advantage of the strengths that each methodology has to offer. Taking a mixed-methods approach also allows me to leverage the following methodological strengths (Johnson & Onwuegubuzie, 2004, p. 21):

- Words, pictures, and narrative can be used to add meaning to numbers
- Numbers can be used to add precision to words, pictures, and narrative
- Stronger evidence for a conclusion is provided through convergence and corroboration of findings
• Insights and understandings that might be missed when only a single method is used are added
• The generalizability of the results can be increased
• Qualitative and quantitative research used together produce more complete knowledge necessary to inform theory and practice

Faced with the choice of quantitative or qualitative research, I am rejecting the either/or dichotomy and choosing to combine the strengths of each into a third choice.

A third research paradigm, mixed methods (also known as integrative) research, was born out of the paradigm wars between quantitative and qualitative research. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) describe the fundamental principle of mixed research in the following terms: “According to this principle, researchers should collect multiple data using different strategies, approaches, and methods in such a way that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses” (p. 18). Similarly, Creswell (2008) explains that, “…both types of data, together, provide a better understanding of your research problem than either type by itself” (p. 552). This approach produces superior research over single method approaches by choosing methods that fit the research problem rather than dogmatically clinging to a research paradigm (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (2003) Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research takes a pragmatic approach to research—a departure from the theoretical approach that many qualitative researchers take (Niaz, 2008). If quantitative researchers lie on one end of a spectrum and qualitative on the other, mixed methods researchers inhabit the space in between. Taking a mixed methods approach allows for researchers to choose the methods that best suit investigating their research questions regardless of philosophical alignment.
Mixed method research can be categorized into two types: mixed-model or mixed-method. Mixed-model combines qualitative and quantitative methods throughout the research process. Mixed-method research consists of two different phases during the research design: a qualitative phase and a quantitative phase (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This study will follow the mixed method research design because the first phase of the study will use two surveys and the second stage will use both interviews and focus groups.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) offer researchers an 8-step mixed-methods research process model to follow:

1. Establish research questions
2. Determine if a mixed-method approach is best
3. Choose mixed-model or mixed-method
4. Collect data
5. Analyze data
6. Interpret data
7. Legitimate data
8. Draw conclusions and write report

Although all studies begin with a research problem and established research questions, the remainder of the steps are recursive. Each step does not have to be followed in a linear fashion but can be repeated or reordered as needed (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). See appendix B for a flowchart that combines Johnson and Onwuegbuzie’s (2004) mixed-methods research process model with Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie’s (2003) mixed-methods data analysis.

Quantitative research offers the Gold Standard that many stakeholders value and trust, while Qualitative research offers real-world examples and applications that educators want and
need (Niaz, 2008). Mixed methods research studies cater to audience members on both ends of the ontological spectrum (positivists and post-positivists) and both ends of the stake holder spectrum (policy makers and practitioners).

**Quantitative Data Collection Methods: Two Surveys**

The first step of data collection were administering to students a two-part quantitative survey. Surveys are data collection methods, “…used to describe, compare, or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behavior” (Fink, 2006, p. 1). The results from the first part of the survey provided insights into the participants’ individual opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about their experiences and participation with *Creswell Reads* (Creswell, 2008) (see appendix C). The second part of the survey is a, public domain, pre-designed survey—The Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP)—developed by Pitcher, et al. (2007). It includes 20 questions evaluating each student’s “Self-concept as a reader” (10 questions) and his or her “Value of reading” (10 questions) (Pitcher, et al, 2007, p. 388; Groenke, Reece, & Varnes, 2015 ). There are 20 questions: 10 questions gauging students’ self concepts’ as readers and 10 questions gauging how students’ value reading (see appendix D). The survey was also used to identify potential participants for the interviews and the focus group. Administering a survey to every student (or those who opt-in and/or return permission forms) is the most efficient way to give voice to each student involved in *Creswell Reads*. Questions will consist of a mix of demographic, open-ended, and closed-ended questions (Fink, 2006; Creswell, 2008).

Below is an explanation of the survey samples and designs of both parts of the survey (Fink, 2006;).

- Survey samples:
Two part survey--*Creswell Reads* AMRP: All students (approximately 560) attending CHS. Every student will be given the chance to take the survey. If the students are under 18 years old, they will need have a consent form signed by their legal guardians and will also need to give assent. If students are 18 or older, they will only need to provide a signed consent form.

- **Survey methods:**
  - *Creswell Reads* and AMRP: The surveys were administered online using the University of Tennessee, Knoxville’s Qualtrics program. The students completed the surveys during the school day in a computer lab at CHS. The surveys were a self-administered (students completed independently with my assistance, if needed) questionnaire (Fink, 2006).

**Qualitative Data Collection Methods: Interviews and Focus Groups**

*Interviews.* According to Patton (2002), “the purpose of interviewing…is to enter into the other’s perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview…to gather their stories” (p. 341). Researchers turn to interview methods because simple, brief surveys will not provide the depth of information needed. When we need deeper explanations, examples, and descriptions of experiences that cannot be provided through other methods, “qualitative interviews [provide] conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), action researchers can use interviews to discover, “…if programs and policies are working, for whom they are working, and what could be improved” (p. 9). Using an interview can elicit
information to help redesign programs or solve problems that arose during the discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Once the participants completed the surveys, I made a list of all the students who self-identified as Black or bi-racial. Next, I sent a consent form for an interview to each student at school in a sealed envelope. The enveloped contained an additional envelope for students to return their signed consent forms in to the main office. Six students consented to participate in the interviews. Interviews were held both on CHS’ campus and off-campus at a local coffee shop. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and emailed to each participant for review.

Interviewing students individually allowed students to explain their responses to survey questions and allowed me to use follow up probes to elicit more rich descriptions of the students’ literacy practices. It also enabled me to center the students’ individual experiences with race and literacy and how the two may or may not be connected. The students had an opportunity to critique Creswell Reads and to offer suggestions on how to improve the literacy program.

The interviews were semi-structured, dialogic interviews. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a prepared interview guide (appendix E). The questions were open ended, and after participants answered, I used follow-up questions, or probes, to elicit more detail when needed (Roulston, 2010). Using a semi-structured interview format makes each interview unique, while still covering the same predetermined topics.

The semi-structured interviews were dialogic in nature; the interview, rather than merely conveying experience, worked to develop knowledge (Gubrium, 2004; Brinkman, 2007; Roulston, 2010). This type of interviewing, “…rests on the researcher’s interest in promoting interaction between interviewers and interviewees that seeks to foster public dialogue on topics
of concern” (Roulston, 2010, p. 27). Rather than just asking the participant questions, the researcher introduces issues surrounding the topic and explains to the participants that s/he would like to begin a dialogue. During the dialogue, the researcher asks participants to justify opinions and clarify understandings. The participants are also welcome to question the researcher and have s/he defend and explain positions and/or ideas. Because both the interview and the focus group interview guides ask questions surrounding controversial issues (i.e., the Black/White achievement gap) and ask interviewees to co-create knowledge (i.e., describe a literacy program that would fit your needs) a dialogic approach, rather than a mere question-answer approach, was more suitable.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups are group interviews that include participants that have common characteristics and shared experiences (Hatch, 2002). The name focus group is derived from its purpose: “to focus on a particular topic” (Hatch, 2002, p. 132). Being a student at CHS is the common characteristic binding these participants together, while their shared experience is their participation in *Creswell Reads*. The particular topics discussed in the focus groups were both the students’ perceptions of what a racially conscious, student-centered literacy program looks like and their reflections on their experiences of being students of color at CHS. Another advantage of a focus group is, “…being interviewed in groups gives informants a sense of security and comfort that may lead to more candid and reflective responses than in individual interviews” (Hatch, 2002, p. 132). A focus group may also make students comfortable disagreeing with the researcher or taking the conversation in different directions (Hatch, 2002) and will also help to make the focus group dialogic in nature (Roulston, 2010).

Because I am a perceived outside researcher coming in to interview students, I am an adult working with adolescents, and I am White working with Black students, power dynamics
are clearly at play. However, “Focus groups minimize the control the researcher has during the data gathering process by decreasing the power of the researcher over research participants. The collective nature of the group interview empowers the participants and validates their voices and experiences” (Madriz, 2000, p.838). This format allowed students extended power through numbers and gave voice to their views on their school’s common read and their literacy practices.

One focus group was created, and the six individual interview participants were invited to participate. Only four participated in the focus group; the other two could not due to scheduling conflicts. However, I did email the focus group questions to the two who could not participate and invited their responses—one participant provided written responses. The purpose the focus group was to answer research questions two and three. After each of the six individual interviews was transcribed, I developed questions that sought to answer my research questions, but also that explored themes that emerged during the interviews (see appendix F). The focus groups met one time for two hours, and was video- and audio-recorded. The focus group began with a pizza lunch while chatting and catching up. At first, I worried about students having stage fright with the video camera, but as Hinchey (2008) explains, “Although both audiotapes and videotapes can make participants self-conscious at first, many report quickly forgetting that they were being recorded” (p. 84), which I found to be the case. The focus group was transcribed verbatim capturing the participants’ body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.

Along with survey, interview, and focus group data I recorded field notes (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the entire research process, from the planning stages to data analysis to writing the report, I kept a researcher journal where I recorded field notes, arising questions, initial analyses, and general observations among. This became a fourth data set that helped to
provide readers insights into my decision making processes and insights into my autoethnographic journey as both a researcher and a developing racially conscious teacher.

**Trustworthiness of Study**

Using multiple types of data is a form of triangulation, therefore making the findings more trustworthy (Merriam, 2009). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), “…the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 9). Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, multiple data collection methods, and multiple participants, is “…a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 10). Another strategy to increase credibility is the use of member checking in which analyses and interpretations are provided to the participants (Merriam, 2009). The participants are given a chance to provide feedback on, “…whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if the interpretations are fair and representative” (Creswell, 2008, p. 267). After I finished interview transcription and writing the participant narratives, I sent both the transcripts and the narratives to participants and welcomed them to provide any corrections, revisions, or additions; only one participant responded that she did approved of the interview transcripts. See the table below (table 3) for an overview of the study design.

Fernandez (2002) states, “We must recognize and address the lives of students of color who are often the objects of our educational research and yet are absent from or silenced within this discourse” (p. 46). Since the *Creswell Reads* began as a reaction to the schools’ Black/White achievement gap, it was imperative to center Black students’ voices on and reactions to this phenomenon and their own personal literacy practices. In my dissertation, I hope that the participants’ words and stories are the focus of their literacy experiences rather than
the current harmful gap discourse which potentially produces both deficit theories in teachers and self-fulfilling prophecies in students (Rosenblatt, 2013). Below is a table (table 3) summarizing the study design.

Table 3
*Summary of Study Design*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Research Questions Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Step 1: 2 Part Survey</td>
<td>99 CHS Students, all students invited</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A: <em>Creswell Reads</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B: AMRP Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Step 2: Individual</td>
<td>6 CHS students, identifying as Black or bi-racial</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Step 3: Focus Group</td>
<td>Same students who participated in interviews</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A researcher journal was kept throughout the entire study

**Research Questions**

1. How do Black students at CHS respond to a school-wide, common-read initiative intended to close racial disparities in the achievement gap?
2. How do Black students at CHS see themselves as readers?
   a. Are they motivated, engaged readers?
   b. What are they currently reading on their own?
   c. How do they see themselves as readers both in- and out-of-school?
3. How does race factor into Black CHS students’ reader identities and experiences as readers at school?

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a systematic questioning and meaning making of the mounds of data collected (Hatch, 2002). It, “…involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization,
hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding” in order to “…see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, or generate theories” (Hatch, 2002, p. 148). Descriptive statistics will be used to make meaning of the survey data while memoing and coding will be used to make sense of the interview and focus group data. Data analyses for both the surveys and the interviews and focus groups will be guided by Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie’s (2003) steps of mixed-methods data analysis. The steps are listed below.

1. Data reduction: Quantitative-Running descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analyses

   Qualitative-Exploratory thematic analysis, coding, and memoing

2. Data display: Creating diagrams, tables, and charts to pictorially display data

3. Data transformation: Converting quantitative data into narrative data that can be analyzed quantitatively and/or assigning qualitative data numerical codes in order to present it statistically

4. Data correlation: Correlating quantitative data with qualitative data and vice versa

5. Data consolidation: Combining quantitative and qualitative data to create new, consolidated data sets

6. Data comparison: Comparing data from the quantitative and qualitative data sources

7. Data integration: Integrating quantitative and qualitative data sets into one data set or two separate data sets

As I generated data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups, I referred to these steps to help stay organized and to make sure that I gleaned the most information out of both data sets.
Survey analysis. Qualtrics software has the capacity to run basic descriptive statistics such as calculating averages and disaggregating data based on demographics and items on the survey. First, I analyzed answers for each closed-ended survey question using descriptive statistics, which, “…help[ed] summarize the overall trends or tendencies in [the] data, provide[d] an understanding of how varied [the] scores might be, and provide[d] insight into where one score stands in comparison with others” (Creswell, 2008, p. 191). I also looked at participant responses to open-ended questions. Not only did I look at overall data trends, but I isolated the Black and bi-racial participants’—the intended sample population—responses.

Secondly, I disaggregated the Black and bi-racial survey responses from the rest of the participants’ responses, and I catalogued their responses under each research question. For example, 6 of the survey questions provided evidence for the first research question. The table below (table 4) illustrates the survey and interview question(s) that explored each research question (see appendices C, D, & E).

Table 4
Black and Bi-racial Participants’ Survey Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10*</td>
<td>24, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
<td>12, 16, 22, 24, 37*</td>
<td>1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td></td>
<td>3, 5, 6, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C</td>
<td>13, 17, 19, 23, 25, 29</td>
<td>10, 12, 15-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10*, 13</td>
<td>16-32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Survey questions were open-ended

For example, this produced data such as 15 students read the summer reading book, 4 students read most of the book, 2 students read half of the book, and 8 students read none of the book,
which helped to explore research question one: how do Black and bi-racial students at CHS respond to CR?

I sent a letter and consent form to participate in interviews to each student who self-identified as Black or bi-racial. Six students participated in later interviews. After the 6 students were identified and agreed to participate, I calculated an AMRP score for each participant (see appendix G). In summary, data analysis of surveys consisted of: 1) running descriptive statistics for all participants, 2) running descriptive statistics for Black and bi-racial participants, 3) sorting interview questions with corresponding research questions, and 4) calculating AMRP scores for the 6 interview participants. Several survey questions were also used in the individual and focus group interviews as a way to explore participants survey responses much more deeply.

**Interview and focus group analysis.** The interviews and focus group were transcribed verbatim in NVivo, and I used NVivo’s software to thematically code each transcript and write analytical memos (Saldaña, 2013; Charmaz 2014). Memos include, “…ideas about the data and coded categories…and help direct the inquirer toward…which ideas to develop further and [to] prevent paralysis from mountains of data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 448). As with the survey results, the interview questions were coded under each research question, which provided extended responses to the survey responses. Next, the three prongs of my adolescent literacy theory—Sociocultural literacy theory, CRT, and Racial literacy—were used as the thematic codes. Within each thematic code, a priori, or predetermined codes were established (Saldaña, 2013) (see appendix J). For example, if a student provides a description of his or her literacy practices that counters the dominant discourse of Black adolescent readers, it was coded under the theme of CRT using the a priori code of counter story. Or, if a student claimed that discussing what
they read with friends is important or that reading at home was emphasized by parents, it was coded as Sociocultural literacy theory.

Last, I coded the interview responses according to my methodologies—autoethnography and action research. If a response illustrated or critiqued part of my journey of becoming a culturally relevant educator, I coded it under autoethnography. If a participant suggested how to improve CR or general literacy instruction, it was coded under action research. Below is a flow chart of the coding steps that were taken in this study.

![Flow chart of coding steps](image)

**Figure 4. Coding Steps.**

After I coded each interview and the focus group for each research question, I established themes. For example, for research question 2B, I sorted participant responses into thematic
categories such as what motivates students to read, how students view reading, ways in which they find books, etc. For a visual representation of my coding process, see appendix I. This corresponds to the findings section in which I explain each individual participant’s responses along with their collective ideas and suggestions.

Lastly, I shared my, “…preliminary data analysis and interpretation with [my] study participants to determine whether they agree or disagree with [my] analysis” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 97). I compiled a document including each participant’s respective narratives and findings and emailed to each participant. I invited participants to provide additional information and revisions via email or another meeting. I also sent the final manuscript to participants to review and to show how their participation impacts current and future research in education. Member checking gives, “…participants a real voice equaliz[ing] power arrangements by making them true partners in the research process; it upsets the expert researcher/dependent practitioner relationship as many proponents of action research intend” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 97-98). Again, centering students’ actual voices is imperative when telling the story of adolescent literacy, and providing student-participants with an opportunity to right any mis-representations by the researcher is an important part of that process.

**Study Limitations**

No matter how well a study is designed, there will always be limitations. In this particular study, one limitation was the size of the interview participant sample. Consisting of six female, self-identified African American/Black/bi-racial students, the sample is relatively small. The six participants are approximately 1% of the school population, and only 9% of Black/African-American and bi-racial girls. Because of the small sample size and the nature of qualitative research, these findings are not generalizable to other Black female students at CHS.
nor to students in larger settings. The reader identities of these six participants are not indicative of
other Black female readers, but instead, are highly unique representations of individual
readers. While these participants reader identities are unique, as the interviews progressed, I
realized that these six participants had very similar educational experiences. Because CHS is
relatively small, they all shared the same teachers. If the study had taken place a school that
centered African American studies or a school with a high percentage of Black teachers, the
participants may have had stark differences from the participants in this study. Therefore, I have
provided a thick description of my study setting and participants so that readers can determine
the transferability of the findings.

Another limitation comes with students self-reporting on the survey. For example, one
participant marked that she read half of the summer reading book, but during the interview, I
learned she really only read the first few pages. Also, several times when I asked the students
questions during the interviews, they would ask me if I wanted to know what “they really
thought?” During the research process, it was clear to me that students had two sets of answers:
what “they really thought” and what they thought I wanted them to say. This begs to consider if
their self-reported answers on the survey were honest, representative answers, or if they were
answering the way they knew their teachers would want them to.

Similar to the power dynamics between student/participant and teacher/researcher, is
the racial dynamic of a White researcher with Black participants. During the first part of the
interview, participants excitedly and animatedly talked about books they were reading and about
the role that reading plays in each of their lives. However, when I began asking questions about
participants’ racial experiences, their voices quieted, their body language became more closed
off, their answers were briefer, and oftentimes they avoided eye contact with me. It was clear the
participants were uncomfortable talking about their experiences as Black students to a White researcher. During the focus group, I inquired about the students’ discomfort. I asked, “Am I correct in the assumption that it is uncomfortable to talk about race?” All four focus participants nodded their heads ‘yes.’ Indigo continued, “If you were Black then [those] questions would be a little easier to express because [you] could say ‘Oh, yes, I’ve dealt with that, too. I understand that,’ so, then it makes you open up more. Maybe we weren’t opening up as much because we thought you wouldn’t understand.” As a researcher, my race impacted the comfort level of my participants, which may have affected their self-reporting of experiences with literacy and racism at school.

Next Steps

An action research project requires an additional step—developing an action plan. After I analyze my data, articulate my findings, and perform member checks, I can then say this is what I know and this is how I know it (Hinchey, 2008). Developing an action plan involves answering the question, What am I going to do next, now that I know what I know? (Hinchey, 2008). I am in the process of planning presentations with CHS’ literacy team, building level; administration, and central office administration in order to share both the participant suggestions and my suggestions for improving CR, developing a more culturally aware faculty, and more equitable school policies.
Chapter Four: Exploring and Discussing Findings through Participant Responses

After coding participants’ survey, interview, and focus group responses, I am presenting my findings organized by research questions. For each research question, survey responses are reported and discussed. Next, a vignette is provided for each participant, created from their individual interview and focus group responses. After individual participant response analysis, the qualitative data was looked at holistically and thematic codes emerged. Each research question exploration concludes with both a thematic discussion of the research question responses guided from insights resulting from coding and a personal reflection of how the participant responses affected my growth as a more racially literate and responsive educator.

Research Question 1: How do Black students at Creswell High School respond to *Creswell Reads*?

Survey Results

The students at Creswell High School were assigned John Sundquist’s memoir *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, A True Story* to read during summer break 2016. According to *The Hornbook Guide* reviewer Amy Pattee (2015), the memoir chronicles, Paralympian skier, motivational speaker, and video blogger Sundquist's funny...attempt to examine his romantic encounters after he discovers, at age twenty-five, that he's never actually had a girlfriend. The resulting investigation--presented in reportlike format with footnotes, charts, and graphs--covers ten years of would-be relationships cut short by uncertainty, awkwardness, and misunderstanding. (p. 212)

Of the 99 CHS students surveyed, 29 students self-identified as African American or bi-racial. Of these 29 participants, 19 read all or most of the book, while 10 read less than half to none of the book. Only 33% who read the book viewed it favorably—six liked it, while one loved it.
Two of the stated goals of *Creswell Reads* include 1) inspiring students to become more frequent readers, which would hopefully 2) lead to students becoming better readers. However, of the 29 participants of interest, only 3% claimed that *Creswell Reads* inspired them to read more frequently, and only 13% reported that they have perceived to become better readers due to their participation in the summer reading program. When asked if *Creswell Reads* should be continued, seven students said yes, 12 were neutral, and 10 said no. In summary, according to the majority of participants who identified as Black/African American and bi-racial, the goals of the program were not being met, nor do participants support the CHS literacy team continuing *Creswell Reads*.

**Interview and Focus Group Participant Survey Responses**

Six of the survey participants agreed to participate in interviews to further discuss their reactions to *Creswell Reads*, their personal reading habits, and their racialized experiences as readers at Creswell High School. The following table (table 5) breaks down the selected interview participants’ self-reported demographics including gender, grade level, and race. The table also illustrates survey and interview responses to the first research question--how students respond to *CR*? Similar to the larger survey sample, 66% of the interview participants read most or all of the assigned book. In contrast, all interview participants who read the book either “loved it” or “liked it.” The interview participants claimed that *Creswell Reads* inspired them to read more, improved their reading, and should be continued at a slightly higher rate than the rest of the Black population who completed the survey. The following section will describe how each of the interview participants reacted to the purpose and effectiveness of Creswell Reads.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Anastasia Cole</th>
<th>Sabrina Dalley</th>
<th>Layla Davis</th>
<th>Tanya Evans</th>
<th>Indigo Howe</th>
<th>Jennifer Newell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade*</td>
<td>10 Black</td>
<td>11 AA**</td>
<td>10 AA**</td>
<td>9 Black</td>
<td>11 Bi-racial</td>
<td>11 Black</td>
</tr>
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<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read CR Book</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked CR Book</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR Inspires More Reading</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR Improves Reading</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR Should Continue</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

√ = Yes, √- = Somewhat, = = Neutral, X = No, NA = Not applicable
*Grade level determined during Spring, 2017 semester
**AA=African American

She did, admittedly, enjoy *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True*

### Interview and Focus Group Responses

**Anastasia Cole.** Anastasia explained that she read the assigned *Creswell Reads* book because she did not want to fail the test that is administered at the beginning of the school year. In fact, she says that the test makes it feel like students are being “forced to read” and the only reason students are reading “is so they don’t fail the test.” Typical of extrinsic motivation, or, “… participation in an activity, not for its own sake, but for rewards or the release from some external social demand,” Anastasia reads to maintain high grades and avoid punishment from her
mother (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006, p.81). Her mother watches her grades carefully, and a poor grade from not reading the book would also bring about negative consequences at home. She was happy to report that she scored a 90% on the exam. When we were discussing the book choice for the upcoming 2017-2018 school year, *The Playbook* by Kwame Alexander, her only reflection about the next summer read is that she was unsure how the teachers were going to test the students due to the non-traditional format of the book. It is clear from Anastasia’s discussion about *Creswell Reads* that she is not intrinsically motivated, or reading driven by personal interest, to read the summer books but is extrinsically motivated by doing well in school and pleasing her mother (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006).

She did, admittedly, enjoy *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True Story*. She read it quickly, and enjoyed the multi-genre format, especially the timeline that ran through the book. The author’s relationship woes were also relatable to Anastasia. Even though Anastasia claimed that the challenging vocabulary in the summer reads have helped her improve her reading skills, she does not think the program should continue. She explains, “I feel like they are not getting anywhere with it. I know what they are trying to do, but I don’t think it’s working.” When I asked what she thought the literacy team was “trying to do,” she responded, “I feel like they're just like, 'ok, I know you people aren't going to read over the summer so, we're going to make it a habit to where you guys need to read over the summer and we'll get back to school and there's going to be all this stuff, activities on the book, [but] they don't really do that.” One of the intentions of *Creswell Reads* was for all teachers to engage in content-area related activities in their classes, but Anastasia admits this is not happening. Therefore, it seems she has drawn the conclusion that *Creswell Reads’* only intention is to administer a test to students.
Even though she read the book, it was not out of a growing, intrinsic desire to engage in *Creswell Reads*, but instead, she was reading to avoid failing the exam.

**Sabrina Dalley.** Rather than reading the summer read last minute like she says most of her classmates do, Sabrina reads it weeks before school starts back because it gives her time, “to go back into the book and go through the book” again and helps to gear her back up for school and, “…actually get her head into it” Sabrina read about half of *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True Story* and thought the book “was ok.” She has read all the summer read books so far and plans on reading the selection for next year, but had a hard time getting into this year’s selection because she could not relate to the characters or the events very much. She agrees that the literacy team should continue *Creswell Reads* because “it is a good way for kids to learn.”

**Layla Davis.** Layla gave the book selection and *Creswell Reads* favorable reviews across the board. Not only did she read the entire book, but she “liked it” and could make connections to both the people and the events in the book. She agrees that *Creswell Reads* should continue, “…because in the summertime most kids are focused more on just summer, but in the summertime…it actually gets me back into the school zone. In the summertime…it challenges me to actually read. So, if I didn’t get a book then, then I just wouldn’t read.” For Layla, *Creswell Reads* provides her with likeable, relatable books to read in the summer when she otherwise would refrain from reading.

**Tanya Evans.** Tanya read all of the *Creswell Reads* book selection, “liked it”, and made personal connections to both the people and events in the story. She reflects, “I just liked how real [Sundquist] was. I mean like it was humourous and it was like heartfelt. I like[d] that.” A prolific reader and self-proclaimed “book nerd” and academic, Tanya reads all of her school
assignments plus two to three books per week on her own. Therefore, *Creswell Reads* does not inspire her to read more—she does not need that inspiration; she is intrinsically motivated to read. When asked why *Creswell Reads* has only improved her reading “somewhat,” she responded, “The books they’re choosing…some of them were like below my level. Like I’m on a college reading level so it just felt kind of childish. Not that I didn't learn anything from them, it just it didn't feel like it was a big improvement from reading those books.” She also explained that her classmates just read the summer book “to get it done,” and it does not inspire them to pick up additional books and read more over the summer.

**Indigo Howe.** Indigo lies on the opposite end of the spectrum as Layla. She did not read *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True Story* or any other of the *Creswell Reads* book selections, nor does she think *Creswell Reads* should continue. On her survey, she claimed that she read about half of the book and thought “it was ok,” but during our interview admitted that she only read the first few pages. She said she could not relate to the male narrator nor could she connect to his relationship problems. Indigo explained, “...I don't really care for relationships…he was in a relationship struggle….That was him. I don't know about relationships. Like I don't really have time for any so I just [thought], ‘mmmm, I don't really care.’” When choosing a book to read, Indigo typically turns to the middle of the book to see if she thinks it will be any good, but with the summer read book, she did not even try that strategy.

Her following comments, however, seem to explain her disengagement with *Creswell Reads* a little more in depth. She said, “It was summertime. I don't read in the summer. I just, I don't really think anybody does until the last week of summer. Cause we'll forget it.” Not only could she not relate to the book, it interfered with her summer, and she reflected that it is too
hard to remember a book read over the summer once school starts. She also critiqued the program heavily:

I just, I don't really know what it does. I know it's supposed to help our comprehension and reading better and staying active in the summer but nobody really takes it seriously, and they just kind of read it because the school tells us to. So it doesn't really do anything like they want it to do. So, it's just for them to tell us what to do.

She continued by explaining, “I like reading, but I like reading what I like.” She also heavily objects to the exam students take when returning to school in the Fall. Indigo summarizes, “I'll pick my own book and read it. I'll write a paper on it. But I won't take the test.”

For Indigo, Creswell Reads is a uniform, imposed, meaningless literacy program that she refuses to engage in even if means she begins the school year with an F in her classes.

**Jennifer Newell.** Like Indigo, Jennifer refuses to participate in Creswell Reads. She explains, “I feel like reading over the summer for school is unnecessary because that’s my summer break. You wanting me to do a summer read over break? No way. I’d rather read something on my own time over summer, just not what they want me to read.” Similar to Tonya’s responses, Jennifer does not dislike reading, but she dislikes being told what to read over her summer break, when she is capable of choosing her own book. She also believes that all of the books have been poor choices and are unrelatable. Because of this lack of choice, she says, “I will protest it all day. It is totally a choice.”

**Analysis and Discussion**

Of the six interview participants, four (Anastasia, Sabrina, Layla, and Tanya) read most or all of *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True Story*. All four of the readers either “liked it” or “loved” it according to their survey results. Three interview participants
agreed that CR helped their reading abilities at least “somewhat,” while only two believe CR should be continued. The remaining two participants (Indigo and Jennifer) did read the book nor do they think CR should be continued. According to these participants, they will engage in the summer read, but only half find it helpful and even fewer think it should continue.

The motivations of the four participants who read We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, a True Story were external to Creswell Reads. Anastasia’s motivation comes from pressure from her mother to maintain good grades. Since Sabrina and Layla’s family immigrated to America to provide their children with a better education, they read because making the most of their education is important to their family. Tanya has been an intrinsically motivated reader for most of her life. In conclusion, the interview participants who are engaging in CR are already readers and/or are motivated by maintaining good grades and pleasing their families. In regard to these participants, the goal of CR to become more frequent and accomplished readers falls flat; instead, we see students going through the motions of school, which is why the other two participants choose not to participate. Similarly, this disproves the literacy team’s belief that the ‘racial achievement gap’ was due to un-motivated readers. Through these participants, we see this is not the case.

Suggestions from students to improve Creswell Reads. All survey and interview participants were asked to give their opinions on how to improve the summer read. Their responses fell in three main categories: allow students a choice in books, provide engaging activities rather than a test, or eliminate the program all together.

According to an open-ended question on the survey asking participants to give suggestions to improve CR, one participant responded, “Giving us one book that adults read and decided to give us shows no interest to US that they care about how WE feel about reading over
the summer.” There were four additional survey participant responses calling for the literacy team to provide students with choices in books. One student suggested that students should be able to, “choose from a list because not everybody is interested in the same type of books.” Rather than $CR$ consisting of one book, participants would like to have a list of choices from which to choose. Other survey participants suggested the literacy team should elicit more student input on selected works and let students vote on the book choice. The literacy team could elicit book suggestions and book reviews from the students, review them, and then put them up for a vote. As a result, the students would feel their opinions were valued, and the book choice process would be more democratic. Out of the nine open ended responses on the survey, three suggested to eliminate the program, but the other six would consider $CR$ much improved if the book selection was not imposed upon them by their teachers but they instead had a voice in what they wanted to read.

When the six interview participants were asked how to improve $CR$, similar to the survey participants, four suggested that students needed a choice in books. Anastasia believes that more of her classmates would participate because she feels, “like people want to choose their own book.” She continues, “if we have options, then I feel like they would read it. But we don’t have the option to do that.” Laughing, she noted that students are given the privilege to, “vote on Prom locations, [so] why not let us vote for the summer read book?” She suggested the literacy team could come up with five book choices, and students could vote on the book for $CR$ each year. Similarly, Sabrina suggested the “whole class” could vote on the $CR$ book the two to three weeks before school lets out for the summer allowing the students to “…choose a book that everyone would want to read, not just one they want us to read.” Both Anastasia and Sabrina are
referring to an imbalance in power when it comes to reading and find voting on the book a more equitable system for choosing the book.

Layla and Indigo both advocate for students choosing their own books rather than every student reading the same one. Layla says that many students do not like the book choices and would benefit from reading something they personally chose and liked. Indigo admits that some students, including herself, have a hard time choosing books for themselves and suggests that the literacy team give students a list of books they may like organized by genre. She explains that genres could include “sports, fiction, non-fiction, or love stories” and students could pick which genre they prefer and teachers could give them a few book titles to choose from. Indigo’s suggestion actually provides students with two choices: genre and book title.

Similar to choice in books, the interview participants believe that *Creswell Reads* would be much improved if the test at the beginning of the year were eliminated and students were given more autonomy in choosing how to display the knowledge of their chosen book. Sabrina and Anastasia actually noted that the test is an obstacle in providing students with book choices. Empathetic to both teachers’ work loads and the environment, Sabrina says that if students were given a list of books to choose from, the teachers, “would have to [make] so many tests, and I don’t feel like they want to do that,” while Anastasia admits, “that would be a lot of paper.” For these participants, the test at the beginning of the year hinders the ability for students to choose their own books. Both Layla and Indigo reported that they would rather write an essay or a reflection over their chosen book and Anastasia thinks they’re should be more creative, engaging activities in each of classes surrounding *Creswell Reads* rather than just a test. While 32% of survey participants believe that *CR* should be discontinued, several of the interview participants agreed that a choice in books would motivate them to participate and/or engage more in *CR*.
One-size-fits all program will not motivated nuanced readers. As we will see more fully in the next section, each CHS Black and Bi-racial reader is diverse, preferring different genres, different authors, different book selection strategies, different assessment preferences, different reading strategies, and different difficulty levels. It is not possible for one book to both turn students on to reading and to increase their reading abilities. According to Pitcher, et al. (2007), “…school practices act as disincentives because they fail to take into account what motivates adolescents to read” (p. 379), and CR is no different. According to Linda Gambrell’s (2011) article “Seven Rules of Engagement: What’s Most Important to Know about Motivation to Read,” rule number four states, “Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to make choices about what they read and how they engage in and complete literacy tasks” (p. 175).

If Creswell Reads continues, increased student reading engagement hinges on providing students with choice in what they want to read. As shown above, the students who are reading the summer reading books are either already readers and/or are extrinsically motivated by grades and parental approval. To increase intrinsic motivation to read, a personal choice in book and assessment task is imperative.

Autoethnographic Exploration

The fifth stage of Helms’ (1990a, 1990b) White Racial Identity Development model is the Immersion/Emersion Stage in which a, “…person replaces White and Black myths and stereotypes with accurate information…” (p. 62). Spending time surveying and interviewing Black students at CHS marks my foray into the Immersion/Emersion stage by moving from the intellectualization of the previous stage to taking a more experiential and active stance. I moved from theorizing about Black adolescent literacy to exploring these literacies first-hand, which I
would consider more “accurate information.” As I listened to, recorded, analyzed, synthesized, and reported participant responses to their experiences with CR I began to replace previously held stereotypes about Black adolescent readers, and I was able to critique the colorblind approach that the literacy team took when creating the literacy initiative.

During this stage, “emotional as well as cognitive restructuring can happen...and requires emotional catharsis in which the person reexperiences previous emotions that were denied or distorted” (p. 62). One such “reexperience” was my participation in the development of the CR. In the previous stage, the pseudo-independent stage, the individual’s interactions with Blacks primarily, “…involves helping Blacks to change themselves so that they function more like Whites on White criteria for success and acceptability rather than recognizing that such criteria might be inappropriate and/or too narrowly defined” (Helms, 1990a, p. 61). This is exactly what we were doing as a literacy team. Standardized test scores (White criteria for success) drove the inception of CR, and the development of CR was driven by changing our Black student reading habits. Rather than exploring and leveraging the dynamic literacy practices of our students, we imposed upon them yet another system that did not account for the sociocultural contexts or perspectives of our readers.

Listening to participants’ critiques of CR made me face my previous colorblind approach to education and stirred up feelings of guilt and shame. However, as a teacher educator, I realized that this journey has helped me to frame my English Language Arts teacher education courses. As I develop my syllabi and create class activities, I explicitly teach my pre-service teachers about the damage of colorblind approaches to education, White-washed curricula and reading lists, and deficit theories held about Black students. I even invite students to examine their own White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990a) and reflect on how it will affect
their positionality as teachers. None of this could have happened without intense self-examination and centering the voices of Black student readers.
Research Question 2: How do Black students at Creswell High School see Themselves as Readers? (A) Are they Motivated, Engaged Readers?

Survey Results

Part of the survey that students took consisted of the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) which assesses students’ self-concepts of readers and the value they place on reading. Contrary to popular discourses that non-Whites do not read, the survey results showed that CHS’ Black and bi-racial participants are highly motivated to read. When asked if reading is something they like to do, 62% reported that reading is “often” or “sometimes” something they enjoy. Only 1% of participants said they “never” read. Similarly, 93% think reading is a “great,” “interesting,” or “ok” way to spend time, while 1% thinks reading is a “boring” way to spend time. 93% of survey participants claim that knowing how to read well is “important” or “very important.” And, 62% of participants even tell their friends about good books that they have read.

According to a majority of quantitative survey responses, Black and bi-racial students like to read, think knowing how to read well is important, and like to share reading materials with their friends. In contrast to the Creswell literacy team’s belief that students of color were not motivated readers, these responses show they both engage in reading and value reading. The survey also included open-ended responses on additional feelings on reading. Two survey participants added that, “reading is important to do because it can help the reader express new ideas and influence the reader’s life” and that they “love to read, reading is amazing.” An additional participant, says reading “depends on the book,” which was illustrated in the previous section.
Interview & Focus Group Responses

As interview participants responded to a variety of questions about what motivates them to read and about their personal reading habits, it was quickly evident that the participants’ motivations were as varied as their personalities. Their motivations are illustrated in the list below. Participants read:

- To do well on the test (Anastasia)
- To read the book before seeing the movie (Anastasia)
- To be in-the-know and to keep up with what friends have read (Anastasia)
- Because AR in middle school and DIR in high school were motivating programs (Anastasia)
- When they can choose what they want to read
- Books in a series, especially when the book includes a teaser for the next book (Sabrina)
- To research for personal creative writing pieces (Tanya)
- To research for school projects (Tanya, Jennifer, Indigo)
- For entertainment (Sabrina, Layla, Jennifer, Tanya, & Anastasia)
- Because the participant’s family fostered a love of reading by refraining from buying cell phones (Tanya)
- To keep her skills strong so when school starts again, she is not behind (Jennifer)
- To learn information about sports I compete in (Indigo)
- Online because I can control what I read with a click of the mouse (Indigo)
Literacy researchers have found that students are motivated to read by various factors such as “beliefs, values, needs, and goals that individuals have” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997, p. 5; Groenke, 2017) and are illustrated by the varied participant responses above.

The next section is a more in-depth look at what motivates each participant to read and a more thorough construction of each participant’s reader identity. Each participant narrative begins with her reading ‘statistics’ including: what she thinks about reading, what she has been reading, where she finds reading materials, and her AMRP score. The AMRP profile provides a numerical score for the value placed on reading, the self-concept as reader, and a composite score. The numerical score is in the form of a percentage; however, no scale is provided to assign meanings to these scores (see Appendix G). Therefore, I created a ‘grade’ system to provide relatable context to the percentages scored. I assigned the following grades to percentage ranges: A=100-86, B=85-71, C=70-56, D=55-26; F=<25. The remaining narrative fleshes out these ‘statistics’ using the participants’ own words.

**Anastasia Cole**

**Reading is:** “Interesting”

**Summer Read:** Read, Liked, Connected with

**Just Finished:** *The Selection*, Kierra Cass, Young Adult Dystopian Literature

**Currently Reading:** “Maybe One Day” (short story on Wattpad)

**Next Up:** *The Book of Henry* (not realizing it was only a movie—she wanted to read the book first)

**Favorite Genres:** Young Adult: Thrillers, Mysteries, Dystopian

**Finds Reading Materials:** on Wattpad, suggestions from friends, on Amazon

**Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score:** C (74%)
I interviewed Anastasia over the summer in a science classroom at CHS in between her 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} grade years. Probably regretting she gave up one of her summer days to return to the school building, she warily walked in to the front office. At first, she was quiet and reserved and a bit stand-offish. But once we began discussing the books she loves, her voice grew warmer, her smile wider, and her responses less reserved.

Anastasia finds reading “interesting” and is a self-proclaimed “very, very picky reader.” If the plot description on the book jacket of the book she picks up doesn’t catch her attention immediately, she will quickly lay the book back down. And, when she finds a good book, like Veronica Roth’s \textit{Divergent} series, she can’t put it down. She read book one of the series, at the urging of her friends, in two days, and even got in trouble in Math class for reading rather than paying attention to her teacher. And like so many other readers who go to the movies to see cinematic adaptations, she was utterly disappointed with the movie. She explained, “I really liked [the book]. I was ready for the movie and everything. I like criticized the entire movie. I was like, ‘This is nothing like the book. That did not happen.’” Movie adaptations of books seem to be a motivator to read for Anastasia. She wanted to read \textit{The Book of Henry}, before going to see the movie; however, she was unaware it is not based on a book. She also wanted to read \textit{Everything, Everything} by Nicola Yoon before seeing the movie, but the copy was checked out from the library, so she settled on heading straight to the movies.

Similar to the \textit{Divergent} series, Anastasia was also drawn into Kierra Cass’ series \textit{The Selection}. In fact, Amazon’s review of \textit{The Selection} states, “Prepare to be swept into a world of breathless fairy-tale romance, swoonworthy characters, glittering gowns, and fierce intrigue perfect for readers who loved \textit{Divergent}…”(amazon.com). Along with books-with-movie-adaptations, Anastasia also enjoys young adult dystopian series. However, she is currently
reading a short story on Wattpad.com (“the world’s largest community for readers and writers”)
“Maybe One Day” by an unpublished author, which her friend told her was really good and she needed to read. On Wattpad, readers can interact with the authors and can form online social groups around stories. Attracted to popular series, books-turned-movies, suggestions from friends, and on-line writing communities, Anastasia is an edgy, multi-format reader who likes to be in-the-know.

Throughout the interview we laughed together while she excitedly talked about plots of books and discussing reading with her friends. And then I asked her what the worst kind of reading for her was. And, she replied, “school reading.” Her voice became more strained, and she continued, “…because it's really boring. Like the stuff that they make us read, I'm like, ‘Oh, I'm not going to remember this.’” I asked her if she could give an example of “boring” school books, and to prove her point, she responded, “Ummmm…I’m trying to think of the books they made us read…I don’t know.” Unlike the self-chosen books she confidently discussed above, she could not even remember any titles of “school books.” Referencing her earlier comments about the summer read, Anastasia associates school reading with “remembering” and tests. But her reader identity separate from school is highly developed.

Sabrina Dalley:

Reading is: “A lot of books”

Summer Read: Read about half, it was ok, could not relate

Just Finished: If I was your Girl, Ni-Ni Simone, Young Adult Urban Literature

Currently Reading: Nothing

Next Up: Not Sure

Favorite Genres: Urban Fiction
Finds Reading Materials: Public Library, School Library

Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score: C (76%)

Mine and Sabrina’s interview took place at a local coffee shop over a couple of frappuccinos. With that soon-to-be-a-senior-swagger, she was confident, vivacious, and energetic. A fast, expressive talker, her voice had a hint of an accent, and I soon learned that she and her family emigrated from Africa when she was young.

When I asked her what reading was like for her, she responded, “A lot of books. A lot of books. Books are. I love reading. I really do. But, not all books. Not all books.” Echoing previous participant responses, it was important to her that I know she loves reading, but not just any kind of reading. Some books are not to love. So, we skipped right ahead to the kind of books she does love, and she explained, “I love books that have drama in them. And that actually tell a story. That you can get into it. That's how my books are always like.” Now that summer had begun, she had thrown all her time into working at a local fast food restaurant. She was not reading anything at the time but had plans to go to the public library soon to find a book to read. In the summer, she likes to read when she is not working and has free time, which I gathered was not very often.

The most recent book she had read was an urban fiction book *If I was your Girl* by her favorite author Ni-Ni Simone, about a fashionista party queen who finds herself pregnant at the age of 17. It was Sabrina who actually suggested that her friend Jennifer (a participant) read another Simone book. She also talked so excitedly about the *Port City High* series by Shannon Freemon, that we got some sideways glances from neighboring coffee drinkers. She had read four of the eight books in the series and was hoping that the school librarian would buy the remaining four books. *Port City High* is an urban fiction series that follows three friends as they
navigate the social webs of high school. One reason Sabrina is hooked on the series is because, “the books are [about] different things, but the same characters are still in the book [and] new characters come in so like you learn about this one and this one and what happened.” She seems to form a relationship with the characters and wants to continue their journey with them. She also gets hooked on authors like Simone and series like *Port City High* because of the teasers for the next book that she reads at the end.

When I asked her what kind of reading she least enjoyed, her vivacious, fast-talking, animated responses abruptly ended. She responded with nervous laughter, then silence, and then an “ummmmm.” I had to remind her I was not one of her teachers and really wanted to know her thoughts. She quickly launched into how the last two novels she read at school were “too boring” and there was “not enough action until the end.” Just like Anastasia, school reading is the worst kind of reading for Sabrina. Personal choice and forming attachments to relatable characters are motivating forces for Sabrina’s reading. She also seems to need the support of school and a school library to remain an engaged reader. Since it was summer, she was not currently reading a book nor did she have one in her possession to soon start.

**Layla Dalley**

**Reading is:** “Entertainment”

**Summer Read:** Read, Liked, Connected with

**Just Finished:** *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling, Young Adult Fantasy and *When I was the Greatest*, Jason Reynolds, Young Adult Urban Literature

**Currently Reading:** *Say No to the Bro*, Kat Helgeson

**Next Up:** *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas or *American Street*, Ibi Zoboi

**Favorite Genres:** Young Adult Literature, Urban Teen Fiction, Comedy, Romance
Finds Reading Materials: From school librarian’s book-talks, school library

Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score: B+ (88%)

Layla, Sabrina’s younger sister, is much more subdued and reserved. Donning a warm smile and kind eyes, she was eager to answer questions and engage in discussions about reading. Her accent was less noticeable from her sister’s, but she was more open about her family’s history. In Africa, her family lived in Nuba Moro (the Nuba Mountains) in the Sudan. She described her home as war torn and void of educational opportunity. As a result of her immigration and the family’s use of their tribal language in the home, Layla was placed in ELL classes and, during the interview, frequently discussed that her vocabulary is not as strong as her peers’. She sometimes sees this as an obstacle when she reads, especially when reading for standardized tests.

For Layla, reading is “words…entertainment…literature…amazing.” She deems reading important “because we read every day.” Layla differentiates between types of book and types of reading, however. She explains, “some books are entertaining and some of them reflect on you and some of them are just something you don't want to read.” Some books are just fun; they are an enjoyable way to pass the time. Some books cause readers to pause and reflect on the world around them and on their inner worlds. Some books are not pleasurable, not engaging.

She enjoys reading “on her own” and independently “finding out what books mean.” Using the summary on the book jacket to provide and introduction and teaser, Layla enjoys picking out her own books. Working as a school library aide, Layla is constantly surrounded by books and can easily find time to read. She is currently reading Say No to the Bro, a young adult novel by Kat Helgeson about a high school senior who is recruited to participate in the “Prom Bowl.” She was drawn to the book by the title and by the summary on the back. She would
have rather read young adult urban fictions *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas or *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi, which the school librarian book-talked and were quickly checked out by other students. She was waiting on the librarian to tell her when a copy of either is returned.

Layla sees herself as a diverse reader; she likes to mix it up rather than “staying on one thing” and reads “comedy” and “romances,” book series, and books for school. She dislikes books that are scary or have sad endings. She recently finished the *Harry Potter Series* by J.K. Rowling and Jayson Reynold’s novel *When I was the Greatest* about three teenage African American Boys growing up in the Bronx. These recently read books—fantasy and urban fiction—along with the comedic young adult novel she is currently reading illustrates her variety in reading taste.

**Tanya Evans**

**Reading is:** “Good memories”

**Summer Read:** Read, Loved, Connected with

**Just Finished:** *Safehaven*, Nicholas Sparks, Fiction and *The Crown*, Kierra Cass, Young Adult Dystopian Literature

**Currently Reading:** *Emma*, Jane Austen, Classic

**Next Up:** *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen, Classic and *Rumble*, Ellen Hopkins, Young Adult Literature

**Favorite Genres:** Romantic Classics

**Finds Reading Materials:** on her Kindle, at the school and public libraries

**Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score:** A (91%)

I interviewed Tanya in a meeting room at Creswell High School during the school day. When she entered, I noticed her mannerisms: polite speech, erect posture, calm voice, and
demure demeanor. She was calm, collected, and in control. At first I was worried that I would not be able to coax much information out of Tanya, but once we began to talk about books, she became much more open.

When I asked Tanya “What comes to mind when I say reading?” her face lit up and she responded with a warm voice: “I think of like sitting on the couch, just curled up with a book, or like drinking tea.” She laughingly continued, “I'm so old, I love drinking tea. For me, it brings good memories because I love to read.” Fittingly, her favorite author is Jane Austen, which she shares a mutual love of with her older sister. They discuss the novels often and love watching the movie adaptations together. She is excited that her new Chinese exchange student ‘sister’ has begun to read Austen’s *Mansfield Park* as well. Tanya reads two to three books per week and attributes her love of reading to her parents. Unlike her peers, her parents did not give her and her siblings smart phones or gaming systems; instead, they put books in their hands. Tanya reflected, “they read to us, they read with us, they listened to us read, so we've just always grown up reading.” She attributes her skill in reading partly to the importance her parents placed on reading at home.

In fact, she scored perfectly on “self-concept as a reader” portion of the AMRP. When asked if school has helped foster that self-concept, she replied, “I think school is some, but it's mostly just from reading on my own. Like in reading harder books, like I always try to read above my level, such as Jane Austen.” In order to support her independent reading of difficult texts, Tanya looks up un-known words on her Kindle and makes her own character maps in order to keep track of all the characters and how they are related.

Not only does Tanya read classic literature, but she also loves edgy young adult author Ellen Hopkins and contemporary mainstream author Nicholas Sparks. She stays up-to-date with
fashion magazines such as *Teen Vogue, Allure*, and *Harper’s Bazaar* since her career plan is to be a fashion designer. Tanya also loves to write, especially her own raps. The day before our interview, she had been researching the court cases of OJ Simpson and Ray Rice. She was including a lyric that mentioned both and wanted to make sure her words were factually correct. Her friends call her a “nerd” because she will go and check out two to three books at the beginning of the week and return them to the library by the end of the week. She responds, “I really don't care. Like if you call me a nerd, I'm cool with that because I love to read and you can't change that. Nothing they say can change that. It does NOT bother me.” In talking with Tanya, it was clear that reading is an inseparable facet of her identity that she self-nurtures with an eclectic taste in reading.

**Indigo Howe**

**Reading is:** “Paragraphs”

**Summer Read:** Did not read

**Just Finished:** *Numbers*, Rachel Ward, Young Adult Dystopian

**Currently Reading:** Informational texts about sports

**Next Up:** Next book in Ward’s series *Numbers*

**Favorite Genres:** Informational texts about sports

**Finds Reading Materials:** at the public and school libraries

**Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score:** B (80%)

Knowing that there are school-appropriate answers and personal beliefs (which often do not align) Indigo, before she began discussing her thoughts on reading asked in a no-nonsense fashion, “you want me to say what I think?” After I assured her that I wanted to know her thoughts and not what a teacher expected her to say, she responded that reading was, “paragraph
after paragraph. Just a bunch of reading. Not fun.” She continued by explaining that she will read texts she likes, “but once [teachers] give us things that we don't really read or don't understand or are not going to enjoy, we don't read it. If we don't like it, we're not going to read it.” For Indigo, if reading is forced, it is not enjoyable; however, when she chooses books for herself, she is a highly motivated and engaged reader. Shortly after she proclaimed her dislike for reading, she admitted that she had just checked out five books from the school library.

Most of Indigo’s reading is information driven. She is on the high school track and soccer teams and is working toward her dream of being on the US Olympic Taekwondo team. For her upcoming Taekwondo tournament, she read an informational pamphlet containing rules for the tournament. She followed with, “But, see I like to read those things because I need to know those things. I can read two pages full of rules easily.” She also loves reading sports magazines like *Sports Illustrated*, which her dad picks up and shares with her. She engages in this reading, “because [she] like[s] to know what's going on so [she] can do better than them.” One of the books that she recently checked out from the library was about different athletes’ routines and gave a historical overview of track and field. Indigo said that she learned both, “…how [she] can get better and...back then they didn't have blocks. they had to like dig up mud and step in it. I did not know that. So, I learned a little bit from it.” Indigo is highly motivated to read texts that help to sharpen her athletic craft and help her to progress in her fields.

Along with reading about sports, she also enjoys reading informational texts about Earth and about the brain. When Indigo needs help with her reading, she does not hesitate to ask her parents or a teacher. She is also highly motivated to read online because she is in control of the course her reading takes, rather than having to read a lengthy text from beginning to end. She can “click, click, click” until she finds the answer she needs. The only fictional texts that Indigo
mentioned was one of the books she checked out from the school library. She was in the middle of reading Rachel Ward’s first book in the series *Numbers* about a girl who can look into others’ eyes and see the day of their deaths. She also enjoyed *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* Sherman Alexie, which she had just finished reading in her English class. She liked that it was written in the form of a diary. Her fictional leanings—psychological thrillers and diaries—align closely with her preference for informational texts.

**Jennifer Newell**

**Reading is:** “Boring…

**Summer Read:** did not read

**Just Finished:** *Letters from Riefka*, Karen Hesse, Young Adult Historical Fiction and *A Shortie Like Mine*, Ni-Ni Simone, Young Adult Urban Literature

**Currently Reading:** *The Coldest WinterEver*, Sista Souljah, Urban Literature

**Next Up:** Unsure

**Favorite Genres:** Historical Fiction

**Finds Reading Materials:** from her mom, Sabrina, Amazon, a local book store

**Composite Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Score:** D (68%)

With none of Indigo’s hesitancy, Jennifer quickly and defensively complained that reading is “boring” and it makes her “upset” to have read anything “at all.” Once I extended the question and asked her about her reading habits regardless of genre, she said that she likes to read trending articles about celebrities on Snapchat and Twitter and in magazines. She continued, “I try to read everyday. Just so I’m not like a slow reader when school does come back around. So I do try to read like almost everyday.” She also reads to stay up to date on “whatever is going
on in the world…whatever is happening.” She shares pop culture magazines with her mother, and her mother also has a large collection of books and often suggests titles to Jennifer.

Being motivated to read is new for Jennifer. When she was younger, she “was always failing stuff and…just didn't want to read anything. [She] just wanted to get through [her] work.” However, she excitedly explained, “And then, when I got to high school, it was like it clicked, and I was ready to read, and I’m a way better reader now. So, I’m so grateful for that.” Jennifer does not attribute her increased reading abilities and confidence to her mother or to her teachers, but she proudly said she owed it to individual hard work. She explained, “I can do it [read] by myself now. Thank God! About time I can get it. Yeah, I’m so happy I can read by myself now, I don't need nobody's help, and if I do need help, I can just Google whatever words and have it pronounced and get the definition.” She now says she does not have trouble reading in class anymore, and her feelings about reading are much more positive. The previous school year she actually worked as an academic peer buddy reading with intermediate students who were labeled as struggling learners.

After Jennifer and I talked about the books and articles she had been reading, her growing confidence as a reader, and the importance she places on reading, I asked her to return to her initial thoughts on reading: “boring” and “upsetting.” She laughed, and then admitted,

Ok, yeah reading is important. It really is. I mean, if you don't read anything, you're not going to know anything. I mean I do like reading. I read on my phone all the time. Um, I was reading that book. And after that I'm going to read another book, which is not going to be the summer read. And even at school I just read little stuff even on the walls. I like to read stuff; it makes me read faster and more quick, and I can understand everything more.
What prompted her initial defensive and negative response, though? Did she think I would scoff at her reading preferences—urban fiction and pop culture? Was it because she was stuck in a school building on a beautiful summer day? Was it a defense mechanism against her previous reading struggles? Was it a reaction against *Creswell Reads*—a reading program she obviously does not value or support?

**Analysis and Discussion**

Each of these participants differ as readers from one another. They have different motivations, varying levels of engagement, and varied reading preferences. While Indigo is different from Tanya is different from Layla, Indigo is also a different reader when faced with different texts and reading purposes. Echoing Rosenblatt’s earlier warning that the collective reader is a myth, the above profiles show that each participant reader identity is unique. “The reader” is more like an infinitely multi-faceted phenomena that needs to be examined through a kaleidoscope. With each turn of the kaleidoscope, we see a reader who prefers a multitude of texts, needs varying supports, and is motivated by different purposes.

**Discovering students’ reader identities.** In order for teachers to discover their students’ individual reader identities, starting the school year with students completing reading profiles is a simple place to begin. Students can take the AMRP survey followed up by qualitative questions about reading habits. A simple Google search of “high school reading surveys” produces plenty of ready-made reading inventories to choose from. In fact, Jennifer said, “If I was the teacher, I would give like a sheet of genres and book types and authors and give it to people and see like what kind of books and stuff that they like….” It is important to choose a survey that values non-traditional reading genres such as magazines, and especially includes digital mediums, such as blogs, Snapchat articles, website browsing, etc. (Pitcher, et al., 2007). Through the qualitative
follow-up questions to the AMRP, it is clear that many students answered the quantitative
AMRP questions in relation to school-reading. For example, I asked several participants what
they read yesterday, and they replied with nothing. When I prompted them, that reading did not
have to be a novel, but could be online, several of them quickly reported reading things
electronically. If we as teachers spend more time discovering and nurturing our Black students’
reader identities rather than looking at standardized tests scores that position students of color as
non-readers, we would both gain respect in the eyes of our students and position ourselves as
advocates for their reading preferences and abilities.

**Keeping reading alive in the summer.** Again, the purpose of *CR* is to keep students
reading in the summer, to motivate them to read more, and to increase their reading abilities.
While four of the six interview participants did read the summer read book, it is clear that
beyond that, some participants needed help finding additional reading materials in the summer.
Neither Anastasia, Sabrina, nor Jennifer had a next book lined up. If *CR* included choice
amongst students, these participants may have found several books they wanted to read, rather
reading (or not reading) the one book and being done. Similarly, if there were book lists to
choose from (as suggested earlier by several participants), students would have a variety of book
titles at their fingertips. A final suggestion is to open the school library one day per week. Every
participant mentioned checking out books at the school library, and several participants
mentioned the librarian’s book displays, book suggestions, and book talks were motivating
factors to read. Perhaps having the library open to students once per week could help maintain
the excitement they feel about reading when they are in their school’s library and are ‘talking
(book) shop’ with their librarian.
**Autoethnographic Exploration**

*Several findings in this section surprised me. First, I was surprised at how favorably the survey and interview participants viewed reading. I was also surprised at how many diverse motivations for and tastes in reading that the interview participants held. This reaction of surprise substantiates the deficit theories of Black adolescent readers that were entrenched within me.* Why was I surprised that Black adolescents were excited about reading? Why was I surprised that Black adolescent readers had multiple motivations for reading? Why was I surprised that Black adolescent readers’ tastes were as varied as Jane Austen, urban street fiction, and fashion magazines? And the hardest question to consider—would I be surprised if the participants were White? The only possible answer to these questions about my feelings of surprise is that I mistakenly believed the common stereotype that Black adolescents are not readers.

**Research Question 2: How do Black students at Creswell High School See Themselves as Readers? (B) What are they Currently Reading on their Own?**

**Interview and Focus Group Responses**

During each participant interview I asked students: A) What they had just finished reading, B) what they were currently reading, and C) what they were planning on reading next. This proved to be an exciting part of the interview for participants as they animatedly told me about plots of books, characters, research they had been doing, and books they were in line for at the school library. They often suggested these books to friends, and also suggested them to me! The table below (table 6) is a compilation of participants’ responses to the above questions organized into book genre, title, author, and the participant(s) who discussed each text. Among
the six participants, 25 book titles along with one short story and various articles and magazine titles were mentioned as either past, current, or future readings. The same question was posed during the focus group and the five participants mentioned two additional book titles.

**Analysis and Discussion**

These responses continue to illustrate that Black students at CHS are engaged, motivated readers. None of the above mentioned texts were assigned readings—they are all texts that the participants chose to read on their own. Their responses show that they read in a variety of genres and formats with Urban Fiction titles as the most mentioned. Urban street fiction has gained immense commercial success among female adolescents despite teachers’ and parents’ worries that the content and language is inappropriate (Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2018). Even though urban street fiction has been relegated to students’ out-of-school literacy practices, the genre demands and deserves consideration from educators,

…in efforts to further include, motivate, and facilitate meaningful instances of self-efficacy for all students, and particularly those Black adolescent girls who have been historically marginalized within and excluded from meaningful engagements with texts in English classrooms. (Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2018, p. 35)

Analyzing the “social situations, cultural references, political implications, and tenuous gender constructions” within the school curriculum serve as sources of empowerment for Black adolescent females and would work to honor their reader identities and negotiations of American society (p. 35).

Outside of Urban Street Fiction, most of the participants’ book choices were distributed across different genres, except for Tanya, who dominated the Classic literature category, and Jennifer, who dominated the historical fiction category. According to Muhammad and Haddix
(2017), “Black girls’…literacy practices were layered upon one another such that girls were never just engaged in one type of literacy. This multiple layering is important for English educators as youth read text and subsequently engage in multiple literacies as they make meaning of it” (p. 326). No teacher-created, assigned reading list will contain the breadth and diversity of these texts, showing again that giving students choice in what they read, and honoring those choices, is imperative to enriching their literacy lives.

**Autoethnographic Exploration**

The genres that the participants were reading in the most were urban fiction and fantasy/dystopian literature. Looking back at my reading list for the high school English classes I taught, none of these genres were represented. Students were able to pick two young adult novels of their choice, but none of the readings I assigned reflected my participants’ widely read genres. Neither did the book choices for CR. We didn’t choose any books with Black authors and only one book, Variant, was dystopian. Variant was actually the one book chosen for CR that the participants enjoyed reading. My participants continually instilled the belief in me that rather than imposing my ideas of Black adolescent literacy needs upon them, I need to spend more time discovering and leveraging the rich literacy experiences that my students immersed themselves in.
### Table 6
*Interview Participants’ Book Choices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classic Literature</td>
<td><em>Emma</em></td>
<td>Austen, Jane</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Mansfield Park</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Pride and Prejudice</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sense and Sensibility</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dystopian/Fantasy</td>
<td><em>Divergent Series</em></td>
<td>Roth, Veronica</td>
<td>Anastasia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Harry Potter Series</em></td>
<td>Rowling, J.K.</td>
<td>Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Hunger Games Series</em></td>
<td>Collins, Suzanne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Selection Series</em></td>
<td>Cass, Kierra</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Numbers Series</em></td>
<td>Ward, Rachel</td>
<td>Indigo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td><em>Safehaven</em></td>
<td>Sparks, Nicholas</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Fiction</td>
<td><em>Letters from Riefka</em></td>
<td>Hesse, Karen</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Warden’s Daughter</em></td>
<td>Spinelli, Jerry</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pop Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indigo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Fiction</td>
<td>Articles on Snapchat</td>
<td>Skloot, Rebecca</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Immortal Life Henrietta Lacks</em></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informational Texts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indigo &amp; Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Fiction</td>
<td><em>American Street</em></td>
<td>Zoboi, Ibi</td>
<td>Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Blueford High Series</em></td>
<td>Various Authors</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Coldest Winter</em></td>
<td>Sista Souljah</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Hate U Give</em></td>
<td>Thomas, Angie</td>
<td>Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>If I was your Girl</em></td>
<td>Simone, Ni-Ni</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Port City High Series</em></td>
<td>Freeman, Shannon</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A Shortie Like Mine</em></td>
<td>Simone, Ni-Ni</td>
<td>Jennifer &amp; Sabrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>When I was the Greatest</em></td>
<td>Reynolds, Jason</td>
<td>Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult Literature</td>
<td><em>Everything, Everything</em></td>
<td>Yoon, Nicola</td>
<td>Anastasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Rumble</em></td>
<td>Hopkins, Ellen</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Say No to the Bro</em></td>
<td>Helgeson, Kat</td>
<td>Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wattpad.com</td>
<td>“Maybe One Day”</td>
<td>Unpublished Author</td>
<td>Anastasia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 2: How do Black students at Creswell High School see Themselves as Readers? (C) How do they See Themselves as Readers Both In-and Out-of-school?

Survey Results

Six questions on the AMRP give particular insight into how students see themselves as readers. While these questions do not break down students’ self-perceptions as in-school versus out-of-school readers, the responses do give us general perceptions. Out of the 99 survey participants, 29 self-identified as Black/African American or bi-racial--these are the students whose responses are reported here. 93% of students report that reading is “very easy” or “kind of easy,” while 1% of students report that reading is “kind of hard” or “very hard.” Similarly, 24% claim to be “poor” or “ok” readers with 76% believing they are “good” or “very good readers.” These survey responses show that Black and bi-racial students at CHS are confident readers. When comparing themselves to their friends, the results were more even. 49% of students believe they “read about the same” or “not as well” as their friends, while 51% read “a little” or “a lot better” than their friends. This may be an area of future research—why do Black and bi-racial students’ reading confidences break down when they compare themselves to their peers?

As a high school teacher, I know that having students read out loud is a tough road to navigate. Some students read eloquently and expressively, while others nervously and self-consciously stumble through a sentence. However, 66% of CHS Black and bi-racial students view themselves as good or very good when they read aloud, leaving only 37% as unconfident readers when reading aloud. While reading fluency and volume is important (Beers, 2003), reading comprehension is imperative. 72% of students claim that they understand “almost everything” they read when reading alone, while 28% understand “some of,” “almost none,” or
“none” of what they read when reading without support from another person. The last question on the AMRP that gives insight into how students perceive themselves as readers is: “When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I…..” 79% of students can “sometimes” or “always” think of an answer, 14% “have trouble coming up with answers,” and only 7% “can never think of an answer.” This corroborates the above reports about reading comprehension—and understandably, if students comprehend what they read, they can probably answer a teacher’s question about the text.

The results from these six questions from the AMRP, show that Black and bi-racial CHS students are generally confident readers. They believe in their abilities as readers, as comprehenders, and as discussers of texts. However, the CHS literacy team, after seeing disaggregated literacy achievement scores, viewed Black and bi-racial students as struggling readers. Where does this mis-alignment in perception stem from? Possible answers to this question will be explored in subsequent sections.

**Interview Responses**

Each interview participant’s overall AMRP score was calculated and is listed in their individual reading profile above. During interviews, each student was asked follow-up questions about how they view themselves as readers and what reading is like in-school. For a more in-depth look at how participants see themselves as out-of-school readers, reference the previous results to research questions 2A and 2B. Overall, in-school reading for participants had both negative and positive connotations. Echoing their sentiments about *Creswell Reads*, both Indigo and Anastasia associate in-school reading with test-taking. Both Anastasia and Sabrina see in-school reading as “the worst kind of reading”—slow and boring.
Similar to test-taking, Layla sees in-school reading as analyzing “text-book” literature, including breaking down meaning and identifying theme and literary terms. And, Anastasia and Jennifer associate in-school reading with literacy programs such as Creswell Reads, Accelerated Reader (AR), and Daily Independent Reading (DIR) which both motivate and de-motivate them to read. Each reading profile below provides a more nuanced and detailed account of how each interview participant views herself as an in-school reader.

**Anastasia.** Unlike Anastasia’s tendency to binge on good books and to be a social, in-the-know reader, she associates school reading with test-taking and maintaining grades. School books are unmemorable and forced, and for Anastasia, reading has become less frequent. However, school programs such as AR, Creswell Reads, and DIR have kept her reading, whether out of maintaining good grades or out of providing her with a personal choice in book titles. She explained her teacher’s directions for DIR by quoting, “Choose a book, read it for 10 minutes everyday in my class and write what you read that day.” So, it was pretty interesting.” Not only did DIR provide Anastasia with book choice, but she was also able to choose her assessment format. She explained, “You can read as many books as you want, but you had to choose one to do a project over. And then [the teacher] gave us options of projects to choose. So, I thought that was cool. Because usually teachers are like, ‘you all are doing the same project for this.’” She explained that she likes this format of reading much more than whole class novel studies because whole class reads are too slow and do not provide students with as much personal choice.

Anastasia finds reading informational texts in US History and Science as difficult because of the unfamiliar vocabulary. She believes that she “cannot get the meaning across as easily as other people do” and is hesitant to ask for help from her teachers. She uses re-reading
as a comprehension strategy but would value more one-on-one help from her teachers. She admits that not asking for help is “bad” and some teachers do not know she struggles with comprehension. However, she says if “teachers are really paying attention,” they notice she needs help.

Reflecting on ways teachers can improve her reading abilities and motivations, Anastasia provided several suggestions for her teachers. First, it would be helpful if her teachers themselves were more obviously excited about reading. She gives an example of one teacher who inspires her to engage: “She just always sounds excited when she reads. Like she sounds happy all the time when she reads. I'm like 'yeah, I'm going to pay attention to you cause you're interested in the book.'” Enthusiasm about books is contagious for Anastasia—not only via books-turned-movies or peer pressure to read certain texts, but via teacher excitement about reading. Secondly, Anastasia hesitates to ask for help with her reading out of fear of being made fun of by her peers. Therefore, one-on-one time with teachers would be helpful and so would a more empathetic classroom environment.

**Sabrina.** At first, Sabrina hesitated to discuss her in-school reading habits. She nervously laughed and led with a few “ummmmm”s. I reminded her that I wanted to know her opinions and that I was not one her teachers—it was acceptable for her to speak freely even if her thoughts about reading in school were negative. She quickly responded, “ok!”, and began to discuss two recent texts—*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie—which she found “too boring,” too slow at the beginning, and wished there was “more action.”

However, she did say that she has started to read much more since she started high school. She explained, “I remember when I was little, I didn’t like reading. Reading was
nothing to me. Now I like reading a lot.” She also reflects that she has become a more mature reader, and is happy that she has graduated from reading “kiddie” books. She also enjoys having classmates to talk about books with, but says that most of her friends do not read very often, so she has few opportunities to discuss reading. She does, however, suggest book titles to her friends, especially Jennifer and Indigo, and takes this task quite seriously.

Sabrina’s class also engages in DIR: “First we get in there and we read our book for 15 minutes and then we write about it, we write a summary about it, and if we're like not really busy in class, she'll tell us to like get our books out and read them.” She likes DIR because she can pick out her own books to read—the teacher gives them free reign over what they read. DIR is also helpful because Sabrina, “…know[s] most of the kids in there probably never read a book in their life and they're just not reading books. So, why not take the chance right now, to read a book?!” As mentioned earlier, Sabrina works a lot, so having time each day to read seems to be necessary for her reading volume. Sabrina’s English teacher also provides students with reading strategies, and Sabrina believes her teacher, “is really trying to help us become better readers,” which Sabrina finds a lot of value in.

Sabrina finds annotating and study questions helpful to both comprehend texts and to study for the test. She doesn’t really need help with her reading, but when she does, she feels comfortable asking her English teacher. She enjoys completing creative book projects (when the directions are clear) and believes that requiring students to read aloud in class really helps to increase their reading skills.

On the other hand, when her class reads whole class novels, they listen to the audio version, which Sabrina finds extremely frustrating. She has a hard time following along and comprehending and wished she had the option to read to herself. The slow pace causes her “to
zone out to space.” She continues, “And it takes up SO much class time. Don't nobody, I don't want to be sittin' there forever. That's how it is. You read it from the beginning of class to the end of class, and it's still not over.” For Sabrina, listening to audio books in English class is “annoying” and negatively impacts her focus and comprehension abilities.

**Layla.** Layla clearly differentiated in-school reading from out-of school reading; she said, “the books we read in school, they’re different from like actual reading.” She explained that in-school literary texts, or textbook literature, include an abundance of background information and side panels that explain author techniques and “break the literature down for you.” While Layla appreciates the guidance of in-school reading, she, prefers the challenge of discovering meaning and performing textual analysis on her own. Layla’s English class was reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, and unlike her sister Sabrina, she was really enjoying it. She said it was “silly,” “different” from other books, and written in a unique format. Her teacher also facilitated DIR and invited the school librarian in each week to book-talk new titles to the class, which is where Layla found most of the books she was reading or wanting to read.

Similar to her sister Sabrina, Layla did not like to read much when she was younger. However, as she progressed in her ELL classes, she was “…challenged to read better things and bigger things.” At home, she speaks a form of Arabic with her family. She views herself as a slow reader, especially when a text has challenging vocabulary. When she comes to words she does not know the meaning of, she tends to use context clues to decipher the meaning rather than asking a teacher for help. Sabrina plans on going to a state university when she graduates, and she would appreciate if her teachers would challenge her reading abilities by giving her and her classmates, “…college books that like college readers would read to get us to know what it
would be like [in] college. In college, I don't think professors help you out as much, so [teachers should]…try to get us ready for it.” She quickly followed up this call for challenge with explaining that teachers should challenge students, “…to see what [they] can do” but not to pressure them. An independent reader, Layla likes the challenge of reading, but also appreciates the supports that her English teachers provide for her whether it is book suggestions, annotation strategies, or second language support.

**Tanya.** Tanya is a confident reader in her classes whether she is reading *Romeo and Juliet* in her English class or Spanish song lyrics in Spanish class. She values both personal choice in what she reads for class and creative book projects. Two of her favorite book projects include creating a soundtrack for *Romeo and Juliet* and a scrap book over *Mansfield Park*. She also enjoys more traditional literary tasks such as writing essays over *Icarus and Daedelus* and memorizing poetry such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “Israfel.” Tanya does not need help from her teachers with her reading, but she suggests that her classmates may benefit from teachers letting them choose what they read.

**Indigo.** As an in-school reader, Indigo has become both jaded and skeptical. She admitted that she has never read a school book in high school unless the assigned book was read out loud in class. She used to love to read, especially *AR* books. She remembered, “I swear, I knew the people, they were my best friends in all these books. I had a fake dog that was in one of the books. My parents used to swear it was not real.” But now, her, “…imagination is going away…and she doesn’t really enjoy [reading] as much as she used to.” She also has a difficult time trusting the information she reads in history books. Indigo explains, “Because I don't know if it's real or not. And I have questions. I have questions that are hard to answer because you can't really prove it. So, I don't like [reading] history.” When I asked for an example of her
distrust of historical information, she responded that she had seen a video about Christopher Columbus that explained that he was not the first to travel to America, but that is what she had learned at school. Insightfully, she asked, “It just makes me think, what else have we been learning that is wrong?” For Indigo, fictional literature has lost its appeal as she turns more toward non-fiction, but then she has a hard time trusting what is accurate.

However, her favorite classes to read in are still Chemistry and medical classes. Indigo’s English class also engages in DIR, where she discovered the fictional series she enjoys reading now—*Numbers*. The students made movie posters to advertise the books they were reading for DIR, which she really enjoyed. She also liked making a body biography over Candy from *Of Mice and Men*. She has learned annotation techniques, which she finds helpful when reading difficult texts, but she admitted that other reading strategies would be helpful because she feels like she is often trying to figure out things on her own. She also needs more clearer directions and models from her teachers for reading assignments.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer lies on the opposite end of the spectrum from Indigo—she did not enjoy reading until she started high school. In middle school, she, “…started reading more and that's when we had the AR goals, so I HAD to read books.” However, when she was in, “…Freshman English, we read this um this Holocaust book and it was SO good.” Referring to *Night*, this is perhaps the first in-school read that was memorable and enjoyable for her. Sophomore year she loved reading Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, where she enjoyed acting out scenes in front of the class, and Marcus Sedgwick’s historical fiction *Revolver*. She read books of her choice her Junior year during DIR where she read more two more historical fictions and an urban fiction at Sabrina’s suggestion. Jennifer appreciates creative book projects as assessments and thinks teachers should work one-on-one more frequently with their students.
Currently her favorite class to read in is US History where she enjoys reading about Civil Rights, Kennedy’s presidency, and the Vietnam war. She believes that Black history is not taught enough and should not be relegated to the history classroom.

**Analysis and Discussion**

Book choice is a common denominator of the six participant narratives. Each participant values choosing what they read in school and would like for teachers to provide students with personal choice more often. Indigo, sums up the participants’ thoughts with the following words:

[Teachers] need to know not every kid is the same, that can read the same book. People also they don't read, but they want to read. So, they don't want to read this book, but they want to read this book. 'Like, no, we're reading this.' And, so they don't really let them explore. It's more of 'You have to read this, you have to read that'. We don't really get to enjoy it sometimes.

Nancie Atwell (2015), noted teacher-researcher saw this come to fruition in her own classroom. She writes, “Because [students] decide, they engage. Because they engage, they experience the volume of sustained, committed practice that leads to growth, stamina, and excellence” (p. 3). A trail of literacy researchers fall in line behind her (see Guthrie, Wigfield, Allington, Groenke, Gallagher, etc.) and support these students’ claims that having a personal choice in what they read is both empowering and beneficial.

Embedded in each narrative above are participant suggestions for English teachers to help students improve their self-confidence and abilities as readers. DIR has the potential to facilitate these strategies among others by providing students with individual book choice; facilitating opportunities for students to discuss books with one another; and by helping students
find books they like through book talks, book displays, and book posters. Suggestions for implementing a rich DIR program will be outlined in chapter five.

**Autoethnographic Exploration**

Compiling the participant responses for this section made me realize two important aspects of reading for students—just how important choice is and how in-school reading can build-up or tear-down students’ reader identities. Throughout the manuscript, I have made the connection between students self-selecting texts and reading motivation and volume. However, my participants made me realize that allowing them to choose their own books and projects to complete goes further than just honoring their reading preferences and ensuring they like the texts they are reading. Allowing choice also acknowledges that students are experts of their own learning and their own educational needs. It seeks to right the power imbalance between teacher and student. Rather than imposing what I think students would like to read or need to read, allowing students choice forces me to take a step back and learn more about my students through their choices in text. Letting students self-select their own books shows that I, as a teacher, value and trust their choices and their metacognitive perceptions of their own reading abilities.

Reflecting on participants’ experiences with in-school reading also showed me just how tenuous a relationship this can be. For Jennifer and Layla, in-school reading helped to build their reading abilities, confidences, and tastes in reading. In general, they enjoyed the texts read in class and appreciated their teacher’s guidance. On the other hand, in-school reading for Indigo proved to be a substantial de-motivator for reading because she generally does not like texts teachers pick nor does she trust information presented to her. These two students could be sitting in the same classroom—one you have the ability to make as a reader,
and one you have the ability to break as a reader. My participants taught me, that as a teacher, it is imperative to get to know my students as individual readers and to provide ample opportunity for them to develop and showcase their reader identities, so that the classroom becomes a sight of empowerment rather than oppression for them as readers.

Research Question 3: How Does Race Factor into Black CHS Students’ Reader Identities and Experiences as Readers at School?

Interview Responses

The purpose of the third part of the interview was to explore how participants’ perceptions of race personally affect them as readers (the survey did not include any questions about race except for demographic purposes). The first question I asked participants was which racial identifier they prefer—Black or African American or bi-racial? The table below provides each participant’s preferred identifier and their explanation for their preferences. I did not ask participants about their family dynamics, but each participant voluntarily discussed their families in relation to their preferred identifiers; therefore, I have included them in the table (table 7) below.

The only participants who preferred the term African-American over Black were the two sisters who actually emigrated from Africa when they were young. Indigo further explained this preference:

We don't like African American because like my friend Sabrina, she's from Africa but she lives in America. So, like some of my friends are from Africa but they are citizens of America. So, we would consider them African American. African Americans, actual people from Africa, don't like us being called African American
because we don’t understand their culture as they do. But, then other people just say African American, so it causes a problem sometimes.

To these participants using Black or African American is a matter of one’s country of origin. The four participants who were born in the United States are comfortable with and prefer the term Black.

Instead, both Tanya and Indigo, commented that the discomfort with using the racial identifier Black lies solely with White people. The avoidance of saying Black, for Tanya, exposes White people’s discomfort with discussing race. Indigo echoes by saying, “this is a thing that I think all White people don’t like.” I could not agree more; in fact, I wrote about this very concept in the introduction when one of my students called me out for constantly saying African-American when he preferred the use of Black. Using the racial identifier “Black” is a simple, yet powerful linguistic way to begin to dismantle colorblindness—it is an admittance that skin color is visible and has very real social ramifications (Pollock, 2004).

Even though Indigo says she prefers the race label Black, she sees her racial identification as much more nuanced. She self-identifies as “mixed,” and through conversation, it is clear that she is proud of her family’s heritage—Black, White, LatinX, and Native American. However, she explains, “I know how other people see me, they just think I’m Black.” Her father has instructed her that “she’s not always mixed.” He explained, “If you rob a store, they’re going to say that you’re Black. Remember that.” Like Sabrina and Layla, everyday prejudices and outside pressures affect their abilities to self-identify and race labels are often imposed upon them. This is similar to what we, as teachers, do to Black readers when we allow deficit theories to settle in and take hold—we no longer see our students of color as individual, nuanced readers, but as products of standardized tests scores.
Table 7
*Participants’ Preferred Racial Identifiers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Preferred Identifier</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Family Dynamic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>More commonly heard</td>
<td>Black Mother and Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>More professional; “I’m African, and I speak English”</td>
<td>Immigrant from the Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>“I’m actually from Africa”</td>
<td>Immigrant from the Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>“African American is awkward, like you’re not comfortable enough to say Black”</td>
<td>Adopted by White parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>“We don’t like African American” because we’re not from Africa</td>
<td>Black Father, Latinx Mother, White step-mother, Black and Native American grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>(no explanation provided)</td>
<td>Black Mother and Father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After racial identifier discussions, I asked the students a series of questions about their self-identified race and how it connects to themselves as readers. As I sorted through participant responses about how race affects their reader identities and experiences, three main themes emerged in the discussions: 1) desire for Black voices in texts, 2) how Black readers are perceived by others, and 3) structural issues that Black readers face.
Analysis and Discussion

**Black voices in texts.** When I asked each participant if she was drawn to books with Black authors, characters, and culture, five of the six participants said no. Sabrina was the only participant who said she was attracted to Black authors, especially series like *Bluford* and *Port City High*, because she could connect with the characters’ family dynamics and the characters’ daily navigations of high school. When Sabrina suggested that Jennifer read young adult urban fiction *A Shortie Like Mine* by Ni-Ni Simone, Jennifer responded, “I thought it was stupid at first because I’m not about to read this ghetto book.” Jennifer seemed to actually have an aversion to reading a Black author of urban fiction for fear of being viewed as “ghetto.” However, Sabrina persisted, and Jennifer gave in. She admitted, “But, in the end, it was really good. I really loved it” and at the time of the interview she was reading urban fiction novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sista Souljah.

In fact, by examining Table 6: *Interview Participants’ Book Choices*, it is clear that the genre with the most amount of books was urban fiction, and each of the books were written by Black authors. Out the 22 authors that participants mentioned, 41% were Black. This is quite significant because out of the approximate 5,000 books that were published in 2014 for children and teens, only 1% were written by Black authors (Rothman, 2014). The participants in this study are reading Black authors at a much higher rate than they are represented in the publishing industry. Only one participant (Indigo) did not mention texts written by Black authors or about Black culture. However, she did mention reading several magazines and books about sports, specifically Track and Field, in which there is which, proportionally, there are more people of color (www.NCAA.org).
Even though Layla claimed she was not drawn to Black texts, three of the five titles she mentioned were written by Black authors. She was waiting for a classmate to return Ibi Zoboi’s *American Street* to the library because she believes, “It connects! It connects more to me because we immigrated here, [but] we didn’t go through the same situation—different people go through different situations. She’s also from Africa, so I think it will relate to me more.” Layla was also anticipating reading Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* because the protagonist “goes to a rich school and she lives in a bad part of town…. I want to know more about that because why wouldn’t she want to go to one of [her] schools?” Starr, the protagonist, lives in a Black community, but her parents enrolled her in a mostly White, private school, and Layla finds this dynamic curious.

Despite the participants’ claims that they are not drawn to Black authors, we agreed in our discussions that it is important for both students and teachers to see positive images of Black youth by Black authors in both young adult novels and other in-school texts, Sabrina admitted, “I have not read one book that has a Black author that was assigned at school.” At the time of her interview she was in 11th grade but could not recall reading a book from a person of color. On the other hand, she was the only participant whose book titles she was independently reading were by Black authors. She explained, “everyone needs to experience authors of color: You never know what you’re going to find in a book by a different author! You can have a Hispanic author, you can have a White author, you can have a Black author. But you never really know what they’re going to write in the book until you read it.” For Sabrina, it is not only important that she have access to authors of color, but her White classmates should as well.

Jennifer, the importance of reading Black authors is about more than relatability. She also believes her White classmates should be exposed to authors from a different race. She explains,
I feel like we should be reading more Black books anyway because…there are kids out here that are still very racist, and they don’t respect Black people, and they think we’re lower than them. And, I just felt like if they read one book by someone who is Black, and it is a really good book about something Black, I think that they would totally understand that we’re not bad people.

Jennifer aligns with what literacy theorist Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) refers to as the literary idealists. Bishop explains that diverse books could,

…help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes toward difference. When there are enough books that are available that can act as both windows and mirrors for all our children, they will see that we can both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us human.

(Para. 11)

Similar to what my participants reported, Marshall, Staples, and Gibson (2018) report that urban street fiction sells mostly to Black females between the ages of 13 and 30, and “…provides readers, especially girls, with complex representations of Black femininity that can be taken up in a variety of ways” (p. 28). As is discussed below, Black adolescent girls may be drawn to Black authors, particularly urban street fiction, because the texts discuss pertinent issues that are not included in the school curriculum.

**Perceptions of Black readers.** Thus far, the findings section has been focused on the participants’ perceptions of themselves as readers, and to summarize, Black and bi-racial students at CHS are motivated, engaged, and confident readers who read a variety of texts. However, when asked if the participants’ race affects how they are perceived by others as readers, it was clear that they believe that others do not view them as favorably or as capable as
their White classmates. Jennifer blatantly explained, “People think Black people are STUPID, but really we actually like to get into books, and we like to go to college and do work.” She continues, “I just don’t understand why people just think we’re dumber than them, cause we’re really not. Reading is fun. I keep my nose in a book, sometimes. People just look at me. I’m like, ‘Ok, yeah I can read, so what?’”

Similarly, Tanya believes that being a Black reader is, “…unusual…because not a lot of Black kids read…like they think it’s a White thing. Like only White people can be nerds. I really don’t care. Like if you call me a nerd, I’m cool with that because I love to read….” Both Jennifer and Tanya have experienced racial prejudice because they have strong reader identities. It is evident to them that their White peers (and in Tanya’s case her Black peers as well) send a clear message that it is abnormal to be Black and to be a reader, but in both participants’ cases, they proudly push back against that stereotype. Sabrina responds to the construction of this stereotype by explaining that Black students are readers; they just may not be reading what is assigned at school, which, in turn, makes it look like they are not engaged readers.

This cycle, which further entrenches deficit theories of Black readers, affects course placements according to Anastasia and Sabrina. They both believe that Black students are not afforded the same opportunities as White students, especially when it comes to access to advanced classes. Anastasia explained, “There are students that should be in honors and they’re not because I feel like they’re not given the option that everyone else is.” Sabrina claims that there is “not one” Black student in advanced classes. Sabrina believes this lack of student diversity in advanced classes as a source of racism. She reflects, “Because White students are in advanced classes and Black students are not, White students feel like, ‘yeah, we’re better because we are in higher classes…we need to shut them down, we are better than them.’”
Anastasia and Sabrina’s observations are not unfounded. According to Whiting and Ford’s (2009) analysis of the 2008 College Board Report, the found, “Of all racial groups, Black students are the most severely underrepresented among AP examinees—by approximately 50%. By examining the percentage of Black students in general school populations (16.88%) versus their representation in gifted education (8.99%), at least 153,000 additional Black students should be in gifted education classes!” (p. 23). One cause of underrepresentation is lack of teacher referrals (Whiting & Ford, 2009), which speaks to the cycle mentioned above by Sabrina and Anastasia—Black students are not perceived as readers perhaps because their reader identities do not match curricular expectations (ie, predominance of White authors), thus are not placed in advanced courses, thus are not viewed as capable readers.

For some participants, this educational prejudice has become internalized. Tanya previously mentioned that many Black students are not readers and that they view reading as a White people thing. Layla, on the other hand, perceives herself to be “…a slower reader [while] most of the [White students] are faster readers. They learn more than we [African American students] catch on…and I think they have a better ability of catching on faster than we do.” Layla also sees her status as an African emigrant as an extra challenge because English is not her first language nor is it her home language. Layla has internalized these factors as deficiencies, while Sabrina and Anastasia can point to more structural issues in education. Sabrina reflects, “No, I think [African American students] do care about reading, it’s probably they just can’t get into it like everybody else can” because of lack of diversity in curriculum and course placements.

**Structural issues faced by Black adolescent readers.** Along with the lack of Black student representation in AP courses, participants mentioned additional structural issues that either positioned them as poor readers or attributed to lower standardized test scores than their White
peers. Students mentioned two race-based demotivators to read or to engage in class include reading texts where the ‘N’ word is used and reading about topics where people of color are positioned as victims. Participants were also aware that the lack of Black teachers and courses that focus on Black history and culture at CHS is detrimental to their education. Also, a lack of generational opportunities such as low college completion rates by parents were perceived by participants to affect their own educational experiences.

*The use of the ‘N’ word in course content.* There is a current debate in English education whether or not the staple text *To Kill a Mockingbird* should continue to be taught. One point of contention, among many others, is the use of the ‘N’ word in the text. This is not a question that I posed to participants during the interviews, but three participants independently mentioned their dislike of the use of the ‘N’ word in course content. As juniors, the participants had finished reading John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and both Indigo, Sabrina, and Jennifer commented that they do not like reading books that have the ‘N’ word in them. Jennifer went as far as calling *Of Mice and Men* “trash” because of the constant referral of the Black character Crooks as the ‘N’ word (Steinbeck, 1937). She also surmised that the reason her teacher played the audiobook was to avoid saying the word. Whether it is in a novel or in a Black history film for US History, Sabrina said, “Don’t nobody want to hear the ‘N’ word all the time.”

This is something that teachers need to consider when choosing texts for their classes. And, if teachers choose to keep texts in the curriculum that contain the use of the ‘N’ word, more critical discussions need to take place between the teacher and the students. For example, when I taught *Of Mice and Men* I focused on the -isms (Racism, Sexism, Ageism, and Ableism) running rampant in the American public that author John Steinbeck was trying to expose. The use of ‘N’ word in the text by Steinbeck was an exposure of racism. Guiding
students through a close read of Crooks would expose that Crooks was the most skilled, most stable, most learned man on the ranch, but these facts were blinded by the White workers’ racism. However, it is even more important to engage students in a critical discussion on their comfort level with the use ‘N’ word, which I observed two of my interns doing.

Two interns that I supervised as a graduate student taught at an almost all-Black school and were tasked with teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to their 9th grade classes. As previously learned in an English methods course, the pre-service teachers front-loaded their students’ impending exposure to the ‘N’ word in the upcoming novel by providing students with Oprah and Jay Z’s differing opinions on the use of the word. The students were then tasked with holding their own debates and voting on whether or not the ‘N’ word would be said aloud when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In one class, the students voted ‘yes’ to saying the word aloud as a way to reclaim its power. However, they posed that the few White students should not say it, and the White students humbly agreed. Without critical discussions and centering Black students’ voices around the use of the ‘N’ word in school texts, students are experiencing racism at the hands of literature and at their teachers’ silence.

*Course content with people of color positioned as victims.* Sabrina, Indigo, and Jennifer all commented on the negativity that surrounds the teaching and reading of Black history in both their US History and English courses. Indigo comments, “There’s really nothing positive about it.” When faced with learning material about Black history, Sabrina says, “I’m not in the mood for this. I don’t want to deal with this every day.” Both participants agree that Black history and literature should be taught, but they take issue with the way in which it is taught by White teachers while they sit in mostly White classrooms. Indigo explains, “Whenever we talk about slavery…we hate that more than anything because it’s like tension on [us]….They
just look at all the Black people in the class. We have a lot of White people in our class look at us, and it’s just awkward.” Sabrina remembers watching videos in her US History class showing Blacks being beaten during Civil Rights demonstrations. She reflects,

…half of the students would be like, ‘Oh my gosh, why are they getting beat up like this?’ And, I'm just like, ‘Y'all NOT seeing what we're seeing. It's like, y'all making it seem like’, ‘Oh, this is so interesting.’ It's not interesting. Like, people had to go through that. Their parents had to go through it. So, y'all making it seem like, 'Oh, my gosh.' But, y'all not seeing the point of view. There was only like 4 colored people in that class, 4 colored people. So how that going to make us feel?

Choking back tears while listening to Sabrina’s account of her experience of racial trauma at the hands of the curriculum immediately reminded me of one of my students pleading. “…please, not this again” as I began my introduction to Frederick Douglass’ autobiography.

After hearing Sabrina’s and Indigo’s experiences, Jennifer was very defensive of her friends. Apparently, there had been some instances where White kids were laughing about some events of the Civil Rights. Jennifer angrily responded,

And she said that people in her class were just laughing at stuff like that, and I was like, that's disrespectful. You do not sit there and laugh at Black History because your history is fucked up too if you really want to get down to it. You guys tortured Native Americans, who does that? You came and took their homeland, and you don't do stuff like that. And it's just like them kids in that class, they just don't understand, it's mainly the White kids.

Jennifer’s anger was palpable and justified. Her particular insight into the dichotomous teaching of Black and White history is important to take note of. If teachers insist on continuously
teaching the negative elements of Black history, then the dark, ugly side of White history and how it caused the negative elements of Black history should be taught as well.

Indigo admits that these painful parts of Black History need to be taught so they are not forgotten, but Both Indigo and Sabrina call for a more balanced teaching of the painful history of Black Americans paired with historical events in which they are empowered and their societal contributions are highlighted. Sabrina asked, when are we going to learn about Rosa Parks? Malcom X? The Black Panthers? But, Indigo muses, “slavery, it’s all the time.”

This carries over from the classroom onto standardized tests. Indigo illustrates, “A lot of times [the] reading prompts on state tests have been about Black history, and I’m like, ‘Again? Man, this is probably my long-lost uncle from a long time ago.’ It gets old after a while.” Along with all the other pressures of standardized testing, Indigo shows us another pressure that only Black and bi-racial students have to face—racial emotional trauma. Steele and Aronson (1995) while discussing stereotype threat, write, “After a lifetime of exposure to society's negative images of their ability, these students are likely to internalize an ‘inferiority anxiety’—a state that can be aroused by a variety of race-related cues in the environment” and “…may interfere with the intellectual functioning of these students, particularly during standardized tests” (p. 797). Not only are Black and bi-racial students faced with stereotype threat while taking standardized tests, but Indigo uncovers a new threat while testing—racial emotional trauma. Again, we wonder why our student’s of color standardized test scores do not match those of our White students.

**Lack of Black teachers and courses.** Four of the six participants noticed a lack of both Black teachers and courses focused on Black culture at CHS. Indigo reflected, “We learn mostly White history, but at a lot of Black schools, they learn about their history…things they’ve
achieved. We only learn bad things.” Indigo’s perception is that because there is an absence of Black teachers, only negative things about Black history and culture are taught. Similarly, Sabrina states that she takes issue with the way Black history is taught, “Black history can be taught but then again, we don’t have no colored teachers at our school. It's all, it's all White teachers. No offense, but…I wish we had a colored person to like teach US History, actually tell us how it is. But, we don't have NO colored teachers at our school.”

Instead, at a school in a neighboring county, Sabrina exclaims that they have, “African American culture and dances and classes!” Indigo adds, “I have a whole bunch of friends that go there and family and like they have a Black history [class], and their history is way different from ours. Way different.” They also have several Black teachers, and the students associate having Black teachers with a more empowering experience. Indigo explains that because there are Black teachers, “…things are taught differently. And like their Black teachers like look at them as like family.” Indigo claims that her White teachers are there for her and to help her, but, Black teachers, “…understand because they have been there and done that.”

She remembers having a Black teacher in middle school, and she said it was more like having, “…your mom at school instead of like a teacher, like judging you or something.” She continued, “With my parents, we don't talk back, we don't argue back, no, you follow the rules.” However, she, “used to argue with [her] White teachers all the time. But my Black teachers would say 'You're not arguing with me. You know right from wrong. You're not arguing with me' and you wouldn't argue back.” According to the participants, not only do Black teachers teach more positive and empowering curricula and have higher behavior expectations, but they are also stronger motivators for Black students.
The participants call for teachers who embody the characteristics of what Vasquez (1989), Ware (2006), and Ladson-Billings (2009) refer to as “warm demanders.” According to Sabrina, she prefers a teacher who is neither judgmental, harsh, nor flippant, nor is she a pushover. She explains,

You don't want them teachers who like judge you…, but…you just don't want that teacher to be like 'yeah, um, you need to get through that.' [spoken in a sugary sweet voice]. Like, no, you need somebody who can actually motivate you and stuff like that. And like, I wish like some other teachers were like that. They would motivate you and [say] 'Yeah, come on, let's get this done, and I can help you’. I don't need them teachers who put you down all the time.

Sabrina’s definition of a model teacher is extremely close to the original concept of teachers as “warm demanders” (Vasques, 1989) or “…teachers who were successful with students of color because the students believed that these teachers did not lower their standards and were willing to help them” (Ware, 2006, p. 436). Nieto (2008) extends this concept by explaining, “caring does not mean continuous praise, lowering standards, or including simple cultural customs. Instead it combines ‘…respect, admiration, and rigorous standards…’” (p. 31). Ware (2006) also added that warm demanders are seen as “other-mothering” like Indigo mentioned and as believers in and motivators of students as Sabrina and Jennifer mentioned.

It is not necessary for a warm demander to be a Black teacher; in fact, several participants spoke highly of a White English teacher who embodied these characteristics. However, Indigo believes it is easier to align with and trust Black teachers because, “…Black teachers [had] to work harder [for] where they want to be,” while White teachers, “have an easier step on things.” When Black teachers give her specific examples of what she needs to do
succeed, she tends to take their advice over White teachers because of their similar racialized experiences.

Muhammad and Haddix’s (2017) conducted a literature review of the literacies of Black girls and found limited research. What studies they did find focused on reading achievement scores, “rather than their cultural resources” (p. 317). These studies failed to analyze, “…the problems related to achievement, which is usually connected to the instruction and learning environment” rather than a deficiency in skill (p. 317). In short, Black girls’ reader identities are not explored in most literacy research. While I did not set out to conceptualize Black girl literacies, I hope that I have ended up providing a small insight into this rarely studied phenomenon. Honestly, I was a bit disappointed when no males agreed to participate in interviews. But as I sat and listened to these young female adults, I was so glad that these were my participants. Most literacy research with students of color focuses on Black males (i.e., Kirkland, Tatum), and I felt privileged to explore and center female voices.

Autoethnographic Exploration

The Immersion/Emersion stage of Helms’ (1990b) is also, “...characterized by an honest appraisal of what it means to be White in this society” (p. 11). By listening to participants’ stories about being a Black student reader at CHS, I was able to reflect on and explore my experience as a White student. For me, my race was reflected in the texts around me—there was no shortage of in-class texts by White authors. I also never worried about how others perceived me as a reader—no one was surprised that I was a confident reader. Because of this, I quickly found my way into advanced English Language Arts classes which formed a foundation for my later PhD in Teacher Education with a focus in English Education. In these advanced classes, I was comfortably surrounded by classmates who looked like me and shared similar life
experiences. I did not struggle with using ‘standard English’ because it was the standard language of my cultural group.

I did not have to sit through class reading texts using derogatory racial terms. I never recall one of my in-class readings containing the words ‘Cracker’ or ‘Guido’. And every time I was presented with a textual reference of someone of my race, it wasn’t in relation to oppressive forces such as slavery or inequality. All of my teachers were White, and because of the prevalence of White-normative curricula, all of my classes centered White content. In short, I had a blatantly opposite school experience than my participants did. For me, school was a site of comfort and acceptance rather than a site of cultural struggle. Now that I know what I know, I see how imperative it is to dismantle the negative experiences of Black students at school. Work needs to be done to position Black students as successful students surrounded by positive representations of their cultural groups—an advantage that their White classmates experience daily. We need to create classrooms and schools that are representative of all cultural groups, not just of Whites.
Chapter Five: Implications for Teachers, for Policy, and for Future Research

An additional aspect of the Immersion/Emersion stage of Helms’ (1990a) Model of White Racial Identity Development is the evolution from trying to change Black people to adopting a goal of changing the White people around them. Helms (1990b) explains that, “the person so involved in this quest will expend considerable energy in attempting to…engage other Whites in the self-examination process” (p. 11). My experience of the Immersion/Emersion stage culminates in my writing of this implications section. After examining my Whiteness prompted by learning from my participants what it is like for them to be Black readers and students in a White literary and educational world, I have compiled implications for White educational stakeholders.

Implications for Teaching: Literacy

Creswell Reads—Can a One Book, One School Reading Program be Beneficial to Students?

According to “One Book, Well Done” author Elizabeth Monaghan (2014), “Organizations in every state in America, plus the District of Columbia, have hosted a communitywide reading program at one point or another, according to the Library of Congress. So-called One Book programs are everywhere” (para. 1). These programs show no signs of slowing down. The goal of a one book, one community read is to foster a love of reading among its members, bring community members together through reading, and/or to reach underserved populations in need of literacy experiences (Monaghan, 2014). Creswell Reads (CR) shares these same goals; however, the student participants at Creswell High School (CHS) claimed that these goals are not being met with their school’s common read literacy initiative.

Instead of fostering a love of reading, CR focused on student accountability. As a result, the participants’ motivation to engage in CR was to perform well on the required exam that
students take over the book when they return to school in the Fall. Only one of the six participants claimed that CR inspired her to read more. On the other hand, all six participants claimed that CR would be much improved if students had a choice in what they read and if the test was removed. The student participants’ preferences in reading varied far and wide. They read in a variety of genres—classic literature, young adult literature, non-fiction, urban literature, just to name a few. They connected with authors as varied as Jane Austen and Ni-Ni Simone. They read with books in their hands, on their Kindles, and on their computers. Their reader identities are so diverse that one book will never capture their attention.

I know that giving students choice in what they read seemingly defeats the purpose of a one school, one book program, but a one school, one book program is defeating the purpose of inspiring a love in reading and a sense of community in CHS students. As long as students are reading, does it really matter if they are reading the same book? After discussions with participants, I believe allowing students to explore and choose what they want to read will develop their reader identities and increase their intrinsic motivation to read. It is possible for CR to transition to a summer reading program that allows students choice in what they read, whether it is a list of books to choose from, a vote from the student body, or an individual choice.

Community building was also noticeably absent. When the CHS literacy team originally created CR, the intent was for each teacher to engage in subject-related activities connected to the book. For example, when students read A Monster Calls, the art teacher had students create a sculpture representing their personal monsters, and they met after school to place it in a bonfire to symbolize letting go of things in their lives that prey on them. When students read The Running Dream, the physics and chemistry classes studied the components and angles of different types of prosthetic legs. However, Anastasia mentioned that these activities are no
longer taking place. Instead, the participants’ experience is that the books are rarely discussed or incorporated into the curriculum; their main classroom experience includes taking a test over the book. If CHS decides to continue CR, it is important to reinvigorate the original goal of community building by facilitating activities around the book.

Not only are students’ reader identities diverse, but so are their socio-economic statuses. However, except for the 2017-2018 book choice The Playbook by Kwame Alexander, all of CR’s book choices have been by White authors and have featured White, middle class characters. When participants were asked to share the titles of books that they had recently finished reading, were currently reading, or were planning on reading next, 41% of the authors were Black. Only one out of six of the CR books were written by authors of color. An open-ended response from a survey participant suggests, “…since there are multiple ethnic groups, there should be choices that fit those ethnic groups—at least 4 options should be provided, at least.” Students need to be exposed and have access to books by authors with varied genders, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations (#weneeddiverse books; #1000BlackGirlBooks).

In order to incorporate both choice, community building, and diversity, the literacy team could come up with a theme or social issue like immigration or police brutality and create a diverse text set of books for students to choose from surrounding the social issue (S. Demoiney, personal communication, March 2, 2018). Students could choose from diverse authors, choose non-fiction or fiction, or suggest their own reading. For example, if the social issue for the summer was police brutality (an issue that Tanya actually brought up in her interview) students could choose from a reading list similar to this:

- Fiction
  - *How it Went Down* (2015), Kekla Magoon
All American Boys (2017), Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely

The Hate U Give (2017), Angie Thomas

- Non-fiction
  - Citizen (2014), Claudia Rankine
  - The New Jim Crow (2010), Michelle Alexander

If CR continues, it is imperative that the literacy team and administration listen to the voices of the students they serve and incorporate choice, activities, and diversity into the program.

The Potential of Daily Independent Reading to meet Students’ Literacy Needs

Daily Independent Reading (DIR), also known as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) gives students a set amount of time (usually 15-20 minutes) in class to read a book of their choosing, and is often followed by authentic reading activities, such as giving a book talk or writing a book review (Lee, 2011). Five of the six participants engaged in DIR in their English classes, and all spoke positively about it. Many book titles participants mentioned were read during DIR; the following year when three of the participants were in classes where DIR was not implemented, they claimed their amount of reading had declined. They valued choosing what they wanted to read, having access to books via class and school libraries, and being provided with time to read.

According to participant experiences, DIR has the potential to meet the three goals of CR. In regard to choice, students are encouraged to read what they want to, regardless of reading level, topic, or genre. It is important that classroom and school libraries reflect students’ reading preferences, and include a variety of genres such as novels, magazines, graphic novels, and informational texts. When students are given choice in what they read, their motivation to read increases (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lee, 2011). In fact, the report Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) found,
One way that motivation and engagement are instilled and maintained is to provide students with opportunities to select for themselves the materials they read and topics they research. One of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students' school day is to incorporate independent reading time in which they can read whatever they choose.

(p. 16)

While choice, independent reading time is more common in elementary school, the benefits are especially needed in secondary schools, where pleasure reading among adolescents drastically decreases (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Community building via reading can occur during DIR when students give book talks to their classes, create advertisements to hang around the room, or write reviews to be catalogued in the classroom library. This provides students with a choice in how to display their reading experiences and provides them with real-world literacy experiences. In-line with sociocultural reading theory (Gee, 2013), five of the six participants claimed that talking about reading with friends was important to them. These low-stakes, real world accountability measures allow students to engage in conversation surrounding books, which was an original goal of CR.

According to “One Book, Well Done,” another common goal of one book, all read programs is to provide opportunities to perceived underserved communities. The CHS literacy team viewed their Black students as an underserved community as a result of standardized test scores. In order to serve a particular population, however, the voices of that community need to be valued and incorporated into the decision-making process. The same goes for implementing DIR. It is imperative that the books that students have access to are diverse in regard to author, characters, and subject matter. Some students seek mirrors when they read; they want to see themselves and their cultures reflected back at them. Some students seek windows when they
read; they want to see how another person lives and navigates life (Bishop, 1990). Some students seek roadmaps when they read; they want guidance on how to travel a certain life terrain (Myers, 2014). Some students seek escape; they want to read for entertainment. Generally speaking, the participants exhibited these preference patterns.

Sabrina and Layla sought mirrors. Jennifer and Tanya sought windows. Indigo sought roadmaps. Anastasia sought escape and entertainment. Therefore, “It would be helpful for educators to think of reading as extension of self. That is, it might be helpful to think of reading as something greater than a mere literate act…” (Kirkland, 2011, p. 201). In order for DIR to serve all populations of students, students must have access to diverse books, and we, as teachers, can never assume that we know what a student would want to read or benefit from reading and impose that upon them.

During interviews students also responded to the question: “What do you need from your teachers to become better readers?” In summary, several participants called for one-on-one help with comprehension and word recognition. Anastasia explained that when she reads independently, “…I feel like I can't get the meaning across as easily as other people do….I have to read it over and over to understand it, instead of reading it like once.” She said that her teachers do not know that she struggles with reading comprehension, but if she had one-on-one time with them, she would feel comfortable letting them know that she needs help. The frequent and “voluminous” book reading that DIR affords (when implemented with fidelity), “…builds fluency, stamina, vocabulary, confidence, and comprehension” (Atwell, 2015, p. 22) and could greatly help readers like Anastasia.

I have been in and out of several classrooms engaged in DIR. In my experience, teachers usually read their own choice books during quiet reading time in order to model what DIR
should look like. However, this is a missed opportunity to work one-on-one with students with their use of reading strategies (Kittle, 2013; Atwell, 2015). As teacher-researcher Lee (2011) developed a productive DIR program in her classroom, she explained,

I used SSR time to read alongside students, to mentor them, to conference with someone experiencing difficulties, to read aloud and book talk for students, to ask students for suggestions for what I could read next, and more. Basically, I modeled for my students what engaged readers do. (p. 212).

DIR provides teachers with uninterrupted time to work with students on reading skills they need help with in order to both develop their reader identities and to bolster individual reading skills.

What Atwell (2015) refers to as reading workshop, similarly DIR, “…is not a study hall….Here, the English teacher is a reader, a critic, and a guide” (p. 21). While students are quietly reading in her classroom, Atwell circulates the room and has quiet conversations with students. She asks about their books—the main characters, the conflict, the writing. And, my favorite question: “Are you happy?” (p. 21). What an important question to stop and ask our students. I think this would show we value students as readers and their authentic reading experiences. During her check-ins with students she also finds out what students are, “…noticing and thinking, unburden[s] them, teach[es] them, and shares [her] own enthusiasm as a trusted, adult reader” (p. 255). Using individual conversations with students, results from the AMRP or similar reading inventories, and student-identified areas of weakness, DIR is intended to be more than quiet reading time; it is intended to provide differentiated reading instruction and attention for each student.

DIR, more-so than CR, has the potential to meet the reading goals initially laid out by CHS’ literacy team. However, just giving students 20 minutes per day to read is not enough. The
program needs to be robust and diverse in student access to books, student opportunity to relate as a social reader with others, and student reception of individualized help from the teacher. Lee (2011) summarizes,

If we do not create space and time for independent reading and mentor them as readers, how do we expect to live up to our goal of creating lifelong readers?…Helping students sustain and build stamina for reading should be an essential element of any high school English program. Sustained silent reading programs built on research-based factors create opportunities for students to read and for teachers to mentor them as readers. Our adolescents deserve no less. (p. 217)

I suggest that each English teacher at CHS begin to implement DIR in their classes. There are several pitfalls that a DIR program can encounter such as students trying to figure out what they like to read and/or students disengaging and participating off-task behaviors. Sources like Lee’s (2011) article and Pilgreen’s (2000) The SSR Handbook (among many others) provide research based support and best practices to help navigate obstacles that teachers may face when implementing DIR in their classrooms.

**Implications for Teaching: Cultural Competency**

**Racial Literacy**

In my introduction, I listed several racial happenings in my classroom that I did not feel capable addressing. I attributed this to my colorblind upbringing and to my lack of racial literacy. When my students brought up examples of discrimination and racism, I embarrassingly responded with mumblings of “skin color doesn’t matter” or “I’m sure you’re just being too sensitive” or “I’m sure they didn’t mean that.” For example, in my 11th grade English class, we were studying a text where the archetypal use of Black symbolized evil and the use of White
symbolized purity. A Black male student spoke up and said he was tired of blackness always being associated with ‘bad.’ I quickly explained that the symbolism originated from lightness and darkness, day and night, but the student was not satisfied with my explanation.

I moved on in my lesson, and then several years later, I came across a book in free book bin at a local used book store, Henderson and May’s (2005) *Exploring Culturally Diverse Literature for Children and Adolescents: Learning to Listen in New Ways* and was drawn to Tolson’s article “The Black Aesthetic within Black Children’s Literature.” Discussing the dynamic of the symbolism of Black and White in literature, it immediately made me recall Ahmad’s complaint of his over-exposure of Blackness symbolizing evil. Tolson cites a book chapter “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic” by Addison Gayle, Jr. (2014) in which she writes about the historical use of Black and White symbolism originating with Plato and mimicking environmental factors like light and dark, which made me feel like my response to Ahmed was founded.

However, she continued, “The historic practice of bowing to other men’s gods and definitions had produced a crisis of the highest magnitude, and brought us, culturally, to the limits of racial armageddon. The trend must be reversed” (p. 154). She continues that this constant exposure to Black being synonymous with evil makes it nearly impossible to accept the meaning behind the phrase “Black is Beautiful.” However, “the acceptance of the phrase…is the first step in the destruction of the old table of the laws and the construction of new ones for the phrase flies in the face of the whole ethos of the white aesthetic” (p. 154). Ahmed’s protest to our symbolic analysis was a way to reclaim the Black aesthetic, but I did not understand this, nor was I open to “listening in a new way” as the book title suggested. How do we, as teachers, begin to make these connections in real time rather than years and readings later?
Bolstering teachers’ racial literacies is a logical place to start because “Racially literate people can discern how racism, both subtle and overt, influences the way we read the world and identify racist structures, examine and critique racial hierarchies, and give voice to the experiences of people of color” (King, 2016, p. 2). The participants in the study pointed to the need for teachers who are racially literate. Sabrina spoke about the adverse experiences she had in a history class, especially in regard to the teacher. She explained, “she felt like, she knew what she was talking about, but she didn’t. Like I'm sure she went to school for it....She just felt like she needed to be the one to teach it and be the one to talk about it.” In Sabrina’s opinion, her teacher had content knowledge but not a working knowledge of racial literacy. She did not consider her students of color’s feelings when discussing traumatic historical events; she did not invite her students’ generational, experiential knowledge; nor did she monitor other students’ disrespectful reactions. As a result, Sabrina said, “I just keep my mouth shut…it’s not even worth it no more.”

Participants pointed to Black students experiencing unfair disciplinary practices and lack of access to advanced classes at CHS. They also pointed to experiences of overt racism. For example, Layla talked about her classmates making fun of her because of how dark her skin is, while Indigo and her mother returned to their car after a shopping trip at a local store to see “N***** Lover” scrawled across the back of their car. Students need classrooms where they can unpack, analyze, and feel valued while discussing these experiences.

However, since de-segregation, students of color have not had access to racially literate teachers, classrooms, and schools. Education used to be a tool of resistance, a great equalizer, an act of freedom, but after desegregation it was no longer these things (Matias, 2015). When
schools were de-segregated, Black students were torn away from their community-based schools where they learned alongside teachers of color. More specifically, Lamiell (2016) explains,

> During this era of desegregation, two-thirds of black students in public schools were in classrooms taught by white teachers because nearly 44,000 black teachers were fired. Most of these white teachers had limited knowledge of black history and little to no experience with black students, families and communities. Furthermore, they were often told by school district officials not to talk about race in their classrooms for fear it would exacerbate racial tensions in the schools. (para 2)

As a result, students of color lost advocates and were thrown into schools where race mattered but was too taboo to talk about. I would argue that 50 years later, many teachers and schools are in the same position. Indigo claimed that because of the lack of Black teachers at CHS and the lack of her White teachers’ racial literacy that she and other Black and bi-racial students have to take their problems home with them, which usually leads to an escalation of those problems, which then leads to disciplinary actions being taken. However, developing a working Racial Literacy can provide teachers with, “skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping” (Sealy-Ruiz & Greene, 2015, p. 60).

Instead, teachers, including the teachers at CHS, need extended training to become more racially literate. The list below contains suggestions of topics and books to explore:

- Race as a Social Construct
  - *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1997), A. Montagu
  - *Everyday Anti-racism: Getting Real About Race in School* (2008), M. Pollock
Ongoing cultural competency training paired with staff book clubs would be a good way to begin to understand the way that racism infiltrates most of the institutions in America, especially public schools.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

As the faculty and staff of CHS work together to become more racially literate, it is imperative that they begin to create classrooms, curricula, and teaching practices that are culturally relevant. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), “Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 140). Once teachers begin developing their racial literacy, they then need to start incorporating it into their classrooms so that students may directly benefit and can also begin and/or continue developing their own racial literacies. One way to do this is develop a culturally relevant pedagogy.
According to Jacqueline Irvine (2010),

Culturally relevant pedagogy has theoretical roots in the notion that learning is a socially mediated process and related to students' cultural experiences. Culture is an important survival strategy that is passed down from one generation to another through enculturalization and socialization, a type of road map that guides and shapes behavior. If new information is not relevant to those frameworks of culture and cognition, people will never remember it. If the information is relevant, they will never forget it. (p. 58)

When teachers require students to leave their cultural knowledge and assets at the door and to assimilate to the teacher’s cultural expectations, students’ identities and ways of knowing are invalidated, and they can become ostracized from the learning environment and tasks. Instead, Ladson-Billings (2009) outlines eight ways that she observes culturally relevant teaching practices (CRP) in teachers.

Teachers employing CRP value their profession and their teaching craft highly, and they have deep respect for the students and colleagues that they work with every day. These qualities are evident in their professional dress, their organized classroom environments, their positive interactions with students, and the importance they place on education. Culturally relevant practitioners see themselves as community members and urge their students to give back to their own communities. They work tirelessly to grow the community in their classrooms and to create an environment of teamwork. They also stay in close contact with parents and are actively involved in the social aspects and politics of the community. These teachers view themselves as artists rather than technicians; this is not to say that they ignore research based practices, but they embrace the creative aspects of teaching. They see lesson plans at just that—plans. They adapt their lessons in real-time as they see better ways to meet students’ needs.
Perhaps the most important aspect of CRP is the belief that *all* students can succeed; it is not inevitable that some will fail. Practitioners of CRP differentiate instruction, activities, and assessments so that students can display their ways of knowing in a variety of ways. Expectations are high, appropriate supports are freely given, and successes are frequently communicated. It is also important to, “…help students make connections between their community, national, and global identities” (p. 52). Teachers should ask how world events connect to their students’ individual lives and invite students to analyze and reflect on these impacts. Lastly, teachers see their students as rich sources of knowledge that need to be excavated rather than as blank slates. These artisans share, “…an overriding belief that students come to school with knowledge and that that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers” (p. 56). In sum, for teachers to practice CRP, they must be positive and enthusiastic about their students’ capabilities and about the work they do each day.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is the specific way in which a culturally relevant pedagogy is made manifest (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). CRT does not include studying ethnic holidays or eating different culture’s foods or incorporating pop culture into the curriculum or celebrating Black history month (Irvine, 2010). Instead, it requires teachers to take a critical look at their curricula and examine whose knowledge is centered. ELA teachers could start by answering the following questions: Do I include diverse authors and perspectives throughout each unit? Do I value students’ home languages, even if they are not what some would consider ‘standard’? Do I allow students to push back against societal norms? Do I teach and encourage students to view the content, the school, the community, the world critically? Do I take a critical view of established knowledge? When Layla called for teachers who challenged her, when Sabrina called for teachers to motivate and support her, when Indigo called for teachers who
allowed her skepticism of established knowledge, they were collectively calling for teachers with culturally relevant pedagogies who practice culturally responsive teaching.

**Implications for Policy**

The literature reviewed accompanied by participant experiences call for several educational policy changes. These policies range on hierarchical levels including school building level, district level, state level, and national level. The topics include *Creswell Reads*, teacher training, teacher recruitment, and standardized testing. Throughout my conversations with student participants, I was constantly amazed and humbled by the level of critical thinking they engaged in pertaining to their educational experiences. Their lived experiences surpassed the knowledge I had gained from my scholarly readings. As I have repeatedly written before, centering student voices should be at the heart of educational reform.

**Literacy Program Creation: Administrative Support and Accountability**

In Ladson-Billings (2009) recounting of a paper presented by Hollins (1990) at AERA, she explains that most literacy programs fall into three categories:

1. Those designed to remediate or accelerate without attending to the students’ social or cultural needs;
2. Those designed to resocialize African American students to mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes at the same time that they teach basic skills; and
3. Those designed to facilitate student learning by capitalizing on the students’ own social and cultural backgrounds. (p. 11)

From both my experience and the participant experiences with *Creswell Reads*, it is clear that CHS has created a literacy program that falls into the first two categories. However, both
students and the research illustrate that students would benefit from a program falling into the third category—one that is culturally relevant and student centered.

The administration at CHS has a responsibility to encourage these changes and to hold teachers accountable to the fidelity of the program. Working at CHS affords teachers great freedom in their curricula and their teaching, which is one of the reasons I found it very hard to leave. For example, we were given the freedom to create and implement a school-wide literacy program. The literacy team was open to any faculty member, and we were tasked with conceptualizing, organizing, facilitating, and evaluating the new literacy program. However, with ever increasing teaching responsibilities and extracurricular commitments, this soon became burdensome. If CHS continues to implement a literacy program, the literacy team needs more support and leadership from the administration.

As a teacher implemented initiative, there was no accountability built in. We soon heard of teachers telling students they did not even read the book nor did they plan to incorporate it into their curricula. How could we expect our students to buy in and engage in *Creswell Reads* if their teachers did not? One reason that Anastasia did not support the program is because teachers were no longer creating engaging activities with the book. Sabrina and Indigo also explained that educators like a few of their English teachers and librarians who are enthusiastic about books inspire them to read more. They found reading particularly motivating with teachers who are passionate about reading and communicate that passion with their students. As colleagues, we could not hold our peers accountable for supporting and promoting *Creswell Reads*; instead, we needed stronger administrative support to communicate the importance of the program.
Cultural Competency Training

The University where I am a graduate teaching assistant was recently contracted by the county’s public school system to provide cultural competency training for all of its employees. The multi-day training covers topics such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and introduces teachers to a variety of multicultural terminology and concepts. Creswell Schools should follow suit and also require its faculty to undergo an ongoing cultural competency training. Alongside the training, the central office administration should administer a school climate survey to both teachers and students, and focus on how non-White, non-heteronormative students feel about their school environment. Teachers and administration should be led through a review of discipline policies and curricula for a lack of multi-cultural considerations and inclusion. Nieto (2008) explains “Even as we care about all students equally, we also often tolerate policies in our districts and schools that harm students of color…: unequal resources, punitive high stakes testing, and rigid ability-group tracking are some key examples” (p. 29). The survey combined with evidence of White-normative discipline policies and course curricula should provide teachers and administration with motivation to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for their students.

The cultural competency training paired with previously mentioned staff book clubs should provide Creswell Schools with knowledge, tools, and support to make the appropriate changes. A more racially literate and culturally competent staff would create an environment “…in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping” (Sealy-Ruiz & Greene, 2015, p. 60). Rather than sweeping racial issues under the rug, the staff would be more equipped to name and discuss racial inequities in their school. The school district could also monitor their progress
by administering the school climate survey for subsequent years. This could identify both areas in which they are making improvements and areas that still need more focus.

**Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color**

As participants Layla and Jennifer pointed out, CHS has one Black guidance counselor and one Black chorus teacher, who teaches at the high school for one class period. Indigo pointed to the importance of having a Black teacher in middle school at another school system. She appreciated that the teacher treated her as family, and also challenged her academically and held high expectations for her behaviorally. Indigo, Jennifer, and Sabrina referenced the privilege that a neighboring county school’s students had of learning underneath multiple Black teachers and Black administrators. They also have class offerings such as Cultural Studies, African American History, and Tribal Dance, all taught by Black teachers. In the past, this same school has undergone restructuring because of low standardized test scores. However, Sabrina asked,

> Why don't we have that at Creswell? We don't have none of that stuff. I'm so proud of their school, the way that [they] have African American classes. Like they actually have people to teach it and that's so cool. I wish we had something like that, I really do.

Sabrina judges the success of a school on its cultural relevance, not its test scores. Ladson-Billings (2009) makes a similar claim in her foreword to *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. She found that successful teachers believed that, “…it was important that the students were well grounded in their own culture as a prerequisite to becoming versed in what might be considered mainstream culture” (p. xi). These teachers centered African American culture—dance, literature, art—alongside African American history,
“…so that students could see the various ways different groups made sense of the world” (p. xi).

Both an 11th grade student and a seasoned educator and researcher believe that students need to have access to content and educators of their own cultures.

Not only is it important to recruit a culturally diverse staff, but it is also important to find ways in which to retain teachers of color. According to educator Vilson (2015), “To truly transform our education system and recruit and retain teachers of color, we must push multiple levers. One lever is ensuring the cultural competence of all educators” (p.30). All teachers need to be culturally competent, because we are teaching the students in front of us; we are not merely teaching content. Another lever is to hire teachers of color because they serve as immediate models of success for students who share the same skin color, and they also provide an ally for students to have conversations with (Vilson, 2015).

However, the turnover rates of teachers of color are much higher than that of White teachers. Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016) believe retention starts with teacher training—"preservice teachers of Color need teacher education experiences that help them translate their lived experiences as persons of Color into pedagogical capital” (p. 11). But it does not end here. Teacher educators and fellow teachers need to, “…privilege the unique experiences and backgrounds of teachers of Color as valuable and authentic resources in preparing them to meet the needs of diverse learners” (p. 22). Just as White teacher educators and teachers who are non-racially literate tend to oppress and marginalize students of color, they also do so with their colleagues of color. This is why Vilson (2015) claimed that all educators need to become culturally competent—not just to work with students, but to also value the unique contributions that teachers of color make.
Just as students sometimes search for mirrors in their readings (Bishop, 1990), they also search for mirrors in their environments. When Black students do not see Black teachers, they may internalize the idea that teaching is either not an opportunity for them or that it is not something they should aspire to. Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to this as a “staffing pattern” where there is an underrepresentation of Black teachers and oftentimes an overrepresentation of Black janitors or cafeteria workers (p. 19). Just as students are damaged by a lack of representation in their literature, so too are they damaged by these inequitable “staffing patterns.”

With a lack of Black teachers comes a lack of cultural relevance in the classroom for many students…and so continues the cycle. Layla explained that seeing African American teachers at school would be motivating. It would provide her with an example to look up to and someone she could go to for encouragement and advice on navigating college preparation and admissions. Without African American teachers, Layla says that she and her classmates get plenty of advice on scholarship opportunities, but that “we don’t have enough encouragement to go for our dreams.”

**Standardized Test Scores**

No Child Left Behind. As the name implies, policy makers upheld and promoted the belief that standardization is the only way that students of color and low-income students could have an equal opportunity to learn and that school-level faculty could not “…be trusted to assess student learning objectively and accurately” (Hursh, 2009, p. 158). This initiative launched a barrage of standardized testing that shows no signs of slowing. The state department of education that has jurisdiction over CHS, introduces new tests each year and are requiring students as early as third grade to take them. When I first began teaching in 2004, an 11th grade student was required to take the state writing exam and a standardized math exam; current 11th graders must
take English, math, science, and social studies End of Course exams, along with the national ACT exam. In one year of schooling, these students are subjected to five standardized exams.

In the past several years, the state department of education has changed testing companies multiple times, which has resulted in on-line testing platforms crashing, scores being returned late, and tests being scored wrongly. In addition, “Critics have charged that the level of difficulty for a standardized exam depends on whether the State Education Department (SED) wants increased graduation rates or decreased simply by adjusting the cut score, turning a low percentage of correct answers into a pass or a high percentage of correct answers into a failure” (p. 159) For students and teachers, this amounts to aiming at an invisible, moving target. As a result, Indigo says many students do not take the exams seriously because “half the time our scores don’t get back.”

However, these test scores have very real ramifications. When scores are not ‘high enough’, scripted programs are introduced, initiatives are launched, teachers are shuffled, and schools are restructured. Hursh (2009) explains,

in the push to raise test scores, schools cannot develop curricula that build on students’ culture. Consequently, low-income students and students of color are unlikely to do well, not only because of low expectations, but also because of the curriculum does not connect to their experience. Yet because policymakers portray all students as being provided the same opportunities, student failure is blamed on individual lack of effort. (p. 158)

It is a cycle that seems to have no end. Until schools and educators focus on reversing the lack of cultural relevancy in most schools, students will not receive equitable educational experiences.
Educators, stakeholders, and policy makers also need to be aware of the racial, historical implications of standardized testing. Many of the ideas and research questions discussed in this manuscript stem from a blind acceptance of the racial achievement gap. The racial achievement gap refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between White students and Black and LatinX students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For many in education, closing the gap in scores is the “…civil rights issue of our time” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 55). However, we cannot look at the scores ascribed to racial groups without looking at standardized testing’s roots. During Imperialism, scientists set out to discover, catalogue, and order the natural world. This did not stop with plants and animals, however; it soon extended to people (Willinsky, 1998). Craniometry, or measuring human skulls to determine intelligence, did not hold up under the accusations that scientists had skewed data to prove that Whites were smarter, and therefore superior, to Blacks (Gould, 1993; Soares, 2007).

Without a scientific measure of racial intelligence, Alfred Binet, Theodore Simon, and Lewis Terman set out to create a standardized IQ test. Terman, known as a staunch supporter of eugenics, “…imagined a permanent academic achievement gap, a permanent racial hierarchy” (Kendi, 2016, para. 6). Consequently, Carl Brigham “a dedicated eugenicist at The College Board, saw the relevance of the new science to college admissions” and developed The SAT, “…a tool of scientific social selection” which “revealed for Brigham the superiority of the Nordic race (pp. 22-23). As a result, he adopted the belief that, “…scientific intelligence tests should help ensure their social health through various legal and institutional measures, including the selection of their best for the benefits of an elite education” (p. 23). Historically, standardized tests were created in order to ‘prove’ that the Black race was intellectually inferior to Whites. And with current issues like test question bias, stereotype threat, inequitable school
funding, and the lack of Black student access to advanced classes, it seems that standardized
tests, even 100 years later,

have come to literally embody the American doors of opportunity, admitting and barring
people from the highest ranked schools, colleges, graduate schools, professions, and jobs.
Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to
objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies. (Kendi, 2016, para. 13)

Knowing this, educational stakeholders’ faith in standardized testing should be shattered.
Instead, students are subjected to more and more standardized tests at both the local and national
level reifying the racial educational hierarchy that standardized tests create.

More rigid standards and more standardized testing requirements will continue to prove a
hindrance to culturally rich educational experiences. On a state and national level, the emphasis
on standardized testing must begin to dissipate, and the educational system needs to foster and
embrace students’ unique funds of knowledges and ways of knowing rather than trying to
standardize and rank its students.

**Implications for Future Research**

**Replicate Study with DIR**

If the Creswell High School English department decides to implement Daily Independent
Reading in all of its English classes, I would like to conduct a similar study. The study would
begin with assessing teacher’s prior knowledge and opinions of DIR, training teachers in
facilitating robust DIR programs, and conducting a post-assessment of how teacher’s knowledge
and opinions of DIR have changed after implementation. Paralleling research with teacher
participants, I would like to administer the quantitative AMRP questions along with the follow
up qualitative questions to students participating in DIR. These surveys and interviews would take place before and after DIR implementation and would explore students’ engagement with and reactions to *Creswell Reads*. I would like to see if DIR has the potential to meet readers’ needs more-so than *CR* does, especially the students of color at CHS.

**Historical Fiction Book Clubs**

One complaint from several of the participants is how the US History curriculum was presented. Sabrina, Indigo, and Jennifer all felt like the Black aspects of US History were filtered through a White ocular, focused on the victimization of Black citizens during Civil Rights, and unaccepting of students’ life experience surrounding race and racism. However, the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, annually recognize outstanding books for young adults and children by African American authors and illustrators that reflect the African American experience. Further, the Award encourages the artistic expression of the black experience via literature and the graphic arts in biographical, social, and historical treatments by African American authors and illustrators. (n.d.)


I would like to work with a US History class and facilitate student book clubs reading Black authors writing about Black History. The texts would center empowering stories about individuals who show agency and facilitate progress, rather than centering Black historical figures as victims. Pre- and post- student surveys and interviews would be given to explore
students’ perceptions of the importance of learning about Black history and about how Black history is positioned within the curriculum.

**Action Research with University Support**

It would be ideal to develop a study where CHS implemented Cultural Competency training, DIR in English classrooms, and Book Clubs in History classes to see if students feel more valued as readers and as students of color. In order to facilitate this, the school could partner with the local university for data collection, research support, and outcome analysis. As Amos Hatch (2008) writes in his introduction to *The Missing Link: Connecting Teacher Research, Practice & Policy to Improve Student Learning*, “When teachers join forces, they demonstrate that they can effect genuine change in classrooms, and lay claim to professional expertise and commitment, their chances of being heard are greatly enhanced” (p. 7). When the CHS Literacy Team formed and “joined forces” to create *Creswell Reads*, we did so with very little time to research, conceptualize, and evaluate the program.

With teachers’ mounting professional responsibilities, it is hard to carry out genuine action research. But, with a partnership with a University, teachers’ site knowledge paired with professors’ research experience would be a powerful force. As both a previous public school teacher and a current graduate teaching assistant at a local university, I think it is increasingly important for research to take place in schools with teachers and students. Affecting positive change in schools and larger educational policy should be the end result of educational research.
Chapter Six: The Conclusion, but not the End

Entering the Stage of Autonomy

The last stage of Helms’ (1990a) White Racial Identity model is Autonomy. The primary goal of this stage is to internalize, nurture, and apply, “…the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier stages” (p. 62). An individual in this stage, …no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics such as race because race no longer symbolizes threat to him or her. Since he or she no longer reacts out of rigid world views, it is possible for him or her to abandon cultural and institutional racism as well as personal racism. Thus, one finds the Autonomous person actively seeking opportunities to learn from other cultural groups (p. 65-66).

Even though this is the pinnacle of the White Racialization model, it does not mean that the individual is perfect or is at the end of the journey. Instead, White racialization is an ongoing process. With new racialized experiences and developing racial literacy, one’s definition of Whiteness continues to deepen and evolve.

The conclusion of this research project, complete with reading, reflecting, theorizing, interpreting, and learning from members of other cultural groups, marks my entry into the autonomy stage. My entry into this stage, would not have happened without the graciousness and willingness of my participants to share their stories with me. Entry into the developmental stages of my White racial identity and the inception of this research project may have never happened without the brave students of Creswell High School and their insistence that I begin paying attention to issues of race, especially in regard to education. The letter that follows is a
letter written to my Black students at CHS as an act of apology, an act of appreciation, and an act of remembrance.

A Letter to my Students

Dear Students,

I thank you and I apologize.

Camden, you were the first student to insist that I acknowledge race, that I abandon my charade of colorblindness and colormuteness. You are the first to comfortably discuss White and Black, much to my discomfort. You challenged me to adopt the use of the word Black and abandon the use of African American. I see now that my insistence on saying African American was a way to continue to project the idea that I didn’t see skin color. You knew that was not true. If you could read this, you would see that I honored your challenge by asking my participants what term they each preferred and using the race label ‘Black’ throughout my writing. You took this a step further when you tried to get me to say that Damien had the darkest skin of the friends group. I ignored you. I nervously laughed. I told you you were being inappropriate. If I could go back to those moments, I would ask you why. Why did you want me to comment on the darkness of Damien’s skin? Why were you pointing that out to me? What were you trying to teach me? That I do see skin color, and I even see gradations of skin color? That the social barriers tied to skin color intensify with the darkness of one’s skin? That since I felt uncomfortable at your insistence in me saying Black, you were going to challenge me even further? What were you trying to teach me? You should also know that even 10 years later, I still think of you every time I buy a Starbucks coffee. I didn’t know about intersectionality then, but now I think you were showing me that race and class are often intertwined. As a White female, I am optimally positioned to be a teacher—White females are the majority of the
teaching force. My job afforded me the luxury of flippantly buying a five dollar coffee. Perhaps you knew that, and perhaps you knew that I was ignorant of the dynamics at play. I thank you for bringing these issues to my attention—they were lost on me then, but they are not lost on me now. I wish I could tell you how much of an impact you made on my journey of White racialization and my goals to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy. I apologize that I didn’t ask ‘why?’ I apologize that I did not take the time to engage you in conversation and let you teach me what I needed to learn. I thank you, and I apologize.

Ahmad, when you brought up your frustration and the trauma of Black symbolizing evil in literature I was surprised by your insight, but my colorblindness dismissed your claims immediately. I connected Black and White to night and day, while you made associations with skin color. I wish I could tell you that I now know the concept you brought up that day is written about by noted scholars. While it took me a long time to make the connection that constant associations of the color Black with evil can amount to racial trauma, from that day forward, I discussed that symbol with growing unease, and I thought about you each time it came up. Had I known what I know now, I would have asked you to help us unpack that concept as a class. And, I would have challenged myself and the class to find examples in literature where the symbolic concept was reversed. We could have even written our own poems where White symbolized evil and Black symbolized purity. But instead, I brushed you off and moved on with the lesson. I thank you for your insightful literary analysis, but more-so your display of racial literacy. It helped me to grow as a teacher by questioning taken-for-granted literary tropes and to examine them for racism. It also helped me to realize that I needed to center empowering Black literature in my classes. I apologize that I did not step back as the teacher and let the class explore your frustration with you. I thank you, and I apologize.
Jaden, Ray, and Nate, you turned away from me and our relationships were broken when I disciplined you. Jaden, with your high-top, red Converse, you reminded me of my son’s Pete the Cat book. I even brought it in so you could read it, so you could see why the book reminded me of you. We chatted a lot and laughed a lot. You were bright and smart and helpful. As I look back, you were the proverbial teacher’s pet (I know you would cringe at me saying that). But as you began to break classroom expectations, I withdrew my warmth and disciplined you too harshly. You stopped talking to me; the relationship we had built was broken. Ray, when I think of you, I remember your big personality and your ability to light up a room. You were expressive and passionate. As a teacher who insisted on rigid order, even in Theatre Arts, I stifled your drive for acting. I took something you had a propensity for (acting) and made it less than desirable. I don’t blame you for transferring out of my class. Nate, your talent on the court afforded you so many opportunities off the court. I wish then that I could see the pressure that probably came with. As I rode you about increasing your ACT score in order to qualify for college scholarship offers, I never stopped to ask you what you wanted out of life. The pressure that your coaches were putting on me to help you increase your score, I passed on to you. I should have shouldered that pressure and made ACT prep fun and allowed you explore your talents and your future options just as I let the rest of the class do. Jaden, Ray, and Nate, I thank you for showing me that what you needed was a ‘warm demander.’ I didn’t understand the concept then, but as soon as I learned about it, I thought of you three. I am sorry that at times I was warm, and that at times I was a demander. I am sorry that I was never the ‘warm demander’ that you needed. I teach my students about the concept of the ‘warm demander’ often, in honor of you. I thank you, and I am sorry.
Amber, soon after you stood, raised your fist in the air, and yelled “Black Power,” the cancer in your brain took over. As students sent you care packages, visited you in the hospital, and posted pictures and well-wishes on social media, I gave you a wide berth. I stayed away. I didn’t want to re-introduce our conflict amidst your healing. I watched from a distance and kept up with your progress. As your peers and teachers were in awe of your strength in the face of cancer, I was also in awe of the bravery it took to stand up, all alone, and protest socially in front of the student body, faculty, and members of the community. I thank you for your bravery. I thank you for providing the culminating racialized experienced that launched me on a personal journey to become a better teacher for my Black students and to prepare future teachers to do so as well. I apologize for writing you up that day—I knew I should not have. I admit that wrong. I apologize for not asking why you stood up with fist in the air. Why were you protesting? What did you hope to show others? What were you trying to teach me? I thank you, and I am sorry.

I thank you, and I am sorry.

The Obama Effect

As I was conducting background research and still taking classes, I came across a concept known as ‘The Obama Effect.’ On the opposite end of the spectrum from ‘Stereotype Threat,’ ‘The Obama Effect’ affects Black students’ standardized test scores positively. New York Times reporter Sam Dillon (2009) wrote,

Now researchers have documented what they call an Obama effect, showing that a performance gap between African-Americans and whites on a 20-question test administered before Mr. Obama’s nomination all but disappeared when the exam was administered after his acceptance speech and again after the presidential election. (para. 2)
The researchers at Vanderbilt University believe there is evidence for a causation between Black test-takers’ exposure to a successful, empowering story of a Black individual and increased test scores. My hope is that schools and individual teachers extend this concept to their curricula. If Black students were presented with validating, empowering stories of Black historical figures, by Black authors, and of current Black social movement leaders we can begin to reverse that deficit theories that are so deeply entrenched in American society, and we can begin to acknowledge and promote the idea that “Black is Beautiful” within our schools. Transforming our schools as sites of empowerment and success for students of color should be at the forefront of every educational initiative.
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Appendices
Appendix B

Note: Circles represent steps (1–8) in the mixed research process; rectangles represent steps in the mixed data analysis process; diamonds represent components.
Appendix C

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the survey! Remember, if any of the questions make you uncomfortable, you can skip them or choose to end the survey. Please answer each question openly and honestly. No one (teachers, administrators, classmates, etc.) will see your answers except for the researcher.

Click the arrow to begin.

The following questions are about Creswell Reads. Creswell Reads refers to your school’s reading program that requires all students to read the same book over the summer and engage in activities surrounding the book once returning to school in July.

1. Did you read the summer reading book *We Should Hang Out Some Time: Embarrassingly, A True Story*?
   - Yes, all of it
   - Most of it
   - About half of it
   - No, none of it

2. Did you like *We Should Hang Out Some Time: Embarrassingly, A True Story*?
   - I did not read it
   - No, not really
   - It was OK
   - I liked it
   - I loved it

3. Could you make personal connections to the characters in *We Should Hang Out Some Time: Embarrassingly, A True Story*?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No, not at all

4. Could you make personal connections to the events in *We Should Hang Out Some Time: Embarrassingly, A True Story*?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No, not at all

5. Does *Alcoa Reads* inspire you to read more on your own, outside of school?
   - No
   - Somewhat
   - Yes

6. Has *Alcoa Reads* helped you to become a better reader?
No
Somewhat
Yes

7. Should your school continue **Reads**?
   Yes
   It doesn’t matter to me
   No

8. Do you have any suggestions to improve **Reads**?

9. Would you like to add anything about **Reads**?

10. Would you be willing to participate in an additional survey?
    Yes
    No

11. I am in ______ grade.
    9th
    10th
    11th
    12th

12. I identify as ________.
    Male
    Female
    Prefer not to say

13. I identify as ________.
    African American/Black
    Asian
    Caucasian/White
    Hispanic
    Native American
    Bi-racial
    Other
    Prefer not to say
Appendix D

1. My friends think I am _________________________.
   a very good reader
   a good reader
   an OK reader
   a Poor reader

2. Reading a book is something I like to do.
   never
   not very often
   sometimes
   often

3. I read ____________________.
   not as well as my friends
   about the same as my friends
   a little better than my friends
   a lot better than my friends

4. My best friends think reading is _________________________.
   really fun
   fun
   ok to do
   no fun at all

5. When I come to a word I don’t know, I can _____________________.
   Almost always figure it out
   sometimes figure it out
   almost never figure it out
   never figure it out

6. I tell my friends about good books I read.
   I never do this
   I almost never do this
   I do this some of the time
   I do this a lot

7. When I am reading by myself, I understand _____________________.
   almost everything I read
   some of what I read
   almost none of what I read
   none of what I read
8. People who read a lot are _________________.
   very interesting
   interesting
   not very interesting
   boring

9. I am _________________.
   a poor reader
   an OK reader
   a good reader
   a very good reader

10. I think libraries are _________________.
    a great place to spend time
    an interesting place to spend time
    an OK place to spend time
    a boring place to spend time

11. I worry about what other kids think about my reading _________________.
    every day
    almost every day
    once in a while
    never

12. Knowing how to read well is _________________.
    not very important
    sort of important
    important
    very important

13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I __________.
    can never think of an answer
    have trouble thinking of an answer
    sometimes think of an answer
    always think of an answer

14. I think reading is _________________.
    a boring way to spend time
    an OK way to spend time
    an interesting way to spend time
    a great way to spend time
15. Reading is ____________________.
   very easy for me
   kind of easy for me
   kind of hard for me
   very hard for me

16. As an adult, I will spend ________.
   none of my time reading
   very little time reading
   some of my time reading
   a lot of my time reading

17. When I am in a group talking about what we are reading, I ____________.
   almost never talk about my ideas
   sometimes talk about my ideas
   almost always talk about my ideas
   always talk about my ideas

18. I would like for my teachers to read out loud in my classes ____________.
   every day
   almost every day
   once in a while
   never

19. When I read out loud I am a ________.
   poor reader
   OK reader
   good reader
   very good reader

20. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel ________________.
   very happy
   sort of happy
   sort of unhappy
   unhappy
Appendix E

Reading Dispositions

1. What comes to mind when I say reading?
2. Did you read anything at home yesterday? What?
3. What are you reading right now personally, not school related?
4. What is your favorite kind of reading? What gets you excited to read? Why?
5. Do you have a favorite author/favorite genre?
6. What did you read recently that you really enjoyed?
7. Where do you find books/reading materials that you like?
8. Is there anything right now that you want to read? How did you learn about it?
9. What is the worst kind of reading for you? Why?
10. Have your ideas or feelings about reading changed as you’ve grown older?

Reading Socially

11. Do you ever read with friends or other people? If so, what do you read? How does that go?
12. CHECK SURVEY DATA (AMRP) FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT FRIENDS’ PERCEPTIONS OF INTERVIEWEE AS READER: # 1, 3, 4, 6, 11 How did interviewee answer these questions? Ask interviewee to elaborate on survey responses.
13. Do you share reading materials with your friends? If so, what? How does this go?
14. Do you ever discuss what you are reading with your friends? How does this go?

Reading at School

15. Walk me through an ordinary school day and tell me where you did any reading? What kinds of reading do you remember doing in your classes?
16. In what class do you most like to read? Why?
17. In what class is the reading most difficult? Why?
18. Have any of your teachers done something with reading that you really enjoyed? Explain. Why did you enjoy it?
19. How do you think your teachers feel about reading?
20. Tell me about reading assignments you get at school.
21. Do you ever feel like you need help with reading? What kind of help would be useful?
22. Do you get help?
23. What do teachers do that help students become good readers? What do you wish teachers would do?

Common Read ?s

25. What is your reaction to next year’s book choice? (The Crossover, Kwame Alexander)
Racial Identity Questions

26. What is it like to be an African American/Black student at this school?
27. What is it like to be an African American/Black reader at this school?
28. At AHS, Black students score an average of 30% lower on the English II state exam? How do you feel about this? Why do you think this is so?
29. Because of these scores, many people believe that Black students are not good readers. How do you respond to this?
30. Because of these scores, many people believe that Black students don’t care about reading or do not read enough. How do you respond to this?
31. How do you think teachers can help Black students to score higher on state English exams? Is it important to you to score higher on state tests?
32. How do you think teachers can help students/youb increase “Value of Reading” and “Self-concepts as Readers” scores? (Discuss student’s personal scores form AMRP)
Appendix F

- What are you reading now?
  - In school
  - Out of school
  - Who read this Year’s Summer Read? *(The Playbook, Kwame Alexander)*
  - Did any of your classes do any fun activities with the book?
  - Have any of your ideas about reading and the Summer Read change since we last spoke?
  - Does the race of the author affect your interest in a book? Many of you said no, but then many of the books you were reading were by Black/AA authors.

- When we talked about race in our interviews, I noticed a change in many of you. Some of your voices became more quiet and shaky. Some of you became much more serious. Some of you picked at your jeans or crossed your arms across your chest.
  - I inferred from these physical changes that it is uncomfortable for you to talk about race. Is this interference correct?
    - Why or why not?
  - Does it make it more uncomfortable to talk about race because I am White? For example, would you have been more comfortable if Vincent had been the one to ask you these questions?
  - Do you think it is acceptable for a White researcher to even ask you these questions?

- Several of you brought up the fact there are no Black/African American teachers at [Alcoa High School](#), which is located in a predominately African American community. How do you feel like that impacts your education?
  - If [Alcoa](#) were to hire Black/African American teachers, how would that change things?

- The Summer Read was actually created as a reaction to the racial achievement gap. When we first learned about the difference in students’ scores, central office said we had to implement a literacy program and a computerized program was suggested. As English teachers, we pushed back and said that research shows that students don’t improve their reading abilities by practicing drills on a computer. Administration agreed, but said we have to come up with something…which led us to the Summer Read.
  - Say you are in our place? How would you organize the Summer Read?
  - Or, say you were in our place from the beginning. What would you do to improve students’ scores? What program would you come up with?
  - Or, let’s take up the argument some of you brought up that test scores don’t matter and disaggregating the data causes people to look down on students of color.
• What are your plans for the future?

• Has participating in this research study affected your views on reading, schools, race, etc.?
## Appendix G

**Figure 6**

**MRP reading survey scoring sheet**

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Full survey raw score (Self-concept & Value): **/100**

**Percentage score**

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**Comments:**

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*Note: Reprinted with permission from the Motivation in Reading Profile (Gavriloff, Palincsa, Cz-good, & Mistr, 1990)*
Appendix H

First Cycle Coding
I have coded all interviews (6 participants) and surveys (all Black & bi-racial) students by using my research questions:

• **RQ1** How do Black students at CHS respond to a school-wide, common-read initiative intended to close racial disparities in achievement?

• **RQ2** How do Black students at CHS see themselves as readers?
  o **RQ2A** Are they motivated, engaged readers?
  o **RQ2B** What are they currently reading on their own?
  o **RQ2C** How do they see themselves as readers both in- and out-of-school?

• **RQ3** How does race factor into Black CHS students’ reader identities and experiences as readers at school?

Second Cycle Coding

• Sociocultural Literacy Theory
  o Code student discourse surrounding reading
  o Code students’ experiences as readers at home/with families
  o Code students’ experiences as social readers with friends

• Critical Race Theory
  o Racism is Pervasive & Endemic: Code concrete examples of participants’ experiences of overt and systemic racism (only in-school or add out-of-school experiences as well?)
  o Colorblindness: Code evidence of colorblindness by teachers
  o Interest Convergence: Code evidence where teachers want to help when it is in their best interest and/or when it intersects with their interests
Counterstorytelling: Code for stories/information that

- Pushback against deficit theories of students of color
- Challenges to dominant discourses on race
- Further the struggle for racial reform
- Promote racial survival and resistance

- Racial Literacy: Code examples students give for teachers’ and classmates’ lack of racial literacy
- Action Research: Code students’ suggestions for improving reading instruction and teachers’ knowledge of racial literacy
Appendix I
Vita

Kelly Wallace was born in Maryville, TN, where she completed her public K-12 education. After high school, Kelly earned a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature and Psychology and a Master’s degree in English Education from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Kelly began her teaching career in a small high school in East Tennessee, teaching 11th grade English Language Arts, Theatre Arts, and Test Prep/Writing for nine years. In 2014, Kelly returned to the University of Tennessee and began her doctoral studies. She also worked at the university in a variety of roles including course instructor, research assistant, and intern supervisor for the Teacher Education department in the College of Education. Kelly’s research has focused on students’ of color literacy identities, authors of color in the field of young adult literature, and culturally relevant pedagogy.