K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Predominantly White Pacific Northwest: Interracial Conversations, Counter-Stories, and Considerations

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K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Predominantly White Pacific Northwest:
Interracial Conversations, Counter-Stories, and Considerations

by

Bradley Justin Parker

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction

Dissertation Committee:
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Portland State University
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Abstract

K-12 public education in the United States, post Brown v. Board of Education (1954), has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching force, and has persistently underserved students of Color in terms of academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Additionally, K-12 school-based racial equity work that strives to address the operation of racism is inconsistent, difficult to measure, and has not demonstrably created more racially equitable experiences or outcomes for students or educators of Color. In this project, I critically explore K-12 school-based efforts towards more racial equity in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest, and I take an intentional and critical look at the roles and impacts of both whiteness, and of majoritarian White educators, including myself, who make up 89.1% of K-12 educators in Oregon (Oregon Department of Education, 2020) and 86.8% of K-12 educators in Washington (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020). In this critical qualitative interview study inspired by critical race methodology, pragmatism, and bricolage, I center the voices of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest and their experiences with K-12 school-based racial equity work. In the project, I also present a historical account of racial inequity in public education in the U.S., make connections to foundational theories in the study of race and education, and detail many nuanced approaches to and impacts of K-12 school-based racial equity work. Finally, I offer ten considerations and provocations for K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings, and seven additional considerations specifically for majoritarian White educators.
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Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

K-12 public education in the United States, post Brown v. Board of Education (1954), has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching force, and has persistently underserved students of Color in terms of academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Additionally, K-12 school-based racial equity work that strives to address the operation of racism is inconsistent, difficult to measure, and has not demonstrably created more racially equitable experiences or outcomes for students or educators of Color. This research critically explores K-12 school-based efforts towards more racial equity in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest and takes an intentional and critical look the roles and impacts of whiteness and of majoritarian White educators, who make up 89.1% of K-12 educators in Oregon (Oregon Department of Education, 2020) and 86.8% of K-12 educators in Washington (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020).

When I refer to majoritarian White educators, I mean White educators who are of, relating to, or constituting a majority of the K-12 educator work force in the Pacific Northwest, as well as across the U.S. In defining racism, I draw from the working definitions from Dismantling Racism Works (2021), which are grounded in critical race scholarship. In short, racism is a result of the combination of race prejudice and social and institutional power. In more detail:

Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism is when the power elite of one group, the white group, has the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society while shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices. (Dismantling Racism Works, 2021)
While this research is not specifically for White educators and school leaders, it has implications for them, me included. Furthermore, as a White K-12 educator in the U.S., I am part of a disproportionate and overwhelming majority of White educators in the U.S., and thus I share this research as a provocation to consider the potential roles and impacts of my and my White colleagues’ being and participation in institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal racial equity work in K-12 education.

At the institutional level, I explore predominantly White school districts in the Pacific Northwest and their efforts, or lack thereof, in school-based racial equity work. More specifically, institutional contexts can include but are not limited to practices, policies, or ideologies in school and school district contexts that have a disproportionately harmful impact on students and/or staff of Color (Dubose & Gorski, 2021). At an interpersonal level, I explore relationships and coalitions between White educators and educators of Color in racial equity work, as well as the impact of White educators’ actions and inactions, and the difference between intent and impact, on students and staff of Color. Finally, at an intrapersonal level, I draw from critical whiteness studies to discuss an emerging theory of critical humility, interracial comradeship, and sociohistorical responsibility in the context of majoritarian White educators in racial equity work in K-12 public education in the Pacific Northwest.

First, it is important to clarify what I mean when I say that students of Color have historically been underserved by U.S. public education - academically, socially and emotionally. There is no shortage of literature on the “achievement gap” and the “discipline gap.” However, often in educational research, such deficit-based gap mindsets
are rooted in western, positivist, White-centric linearity and measurability, thus creating an opportunity to rethink and reimagine how we both measure and address racial educational inequities. Further, Ladson-Billings (2006a) contended that we should reconceptualize educational gaps as educational debts instead, just as Noguera and Akom (2000) asserted that the achievement gap is actually a failure of an inequitable system of education - more of an opportunity gap for those left out or behind. Ultimately, when students of Color are disafforded a racially equitable opportunity to be successful in school, and if students of Color internalize the institutional and interpersonal racism their educational experience has produced and blame themselves, there are “negative impacts on the psyche, perceptions, and academic performance of these students [of Color]” (Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006, p. 205).

Simply put, Ladson-Billings (2006a) argued that “...this all-out focus on the ‘Achievement Gap’ moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (p. 3), and she is right. The act of ignoring racism and dysconsciously, or uncritically, embracing the prioritization and centrality of standardized test scores and school discipline data while refusing to inquire about or problematize the impact of teacher and/or student race, bias, and the impact(s) of systemic racism and whiteness, are all part of the problem. For example, speaking to the constructs of “gaps,” Muhammad (2020) critiqued more traditional and standard views of educational “gaps” and deficits when she urged:

These so-called gaps in achievement do not account for the decades of dismissive control and educational oppression faced by Black people and others who have experienced disparities… It’s essential that all educators understand the bias and
racism prevalent throughout American history so that they can interrupt it each day. (p. 105)

Muhammad’s (2020) final four words here, “interrupt it each day,” serve as a strong reminder of the fluidity and necessity of conceptualizing racial equity as a process that requires daily awareness and action, not just narrow gazes at test scores and other measures of achievement and discipline data.

Additionally, Carter and Goodwin (1994) argued that historically, “The conventional belief in the intellectual inferiority of visible racial/ethnic individuals has had a powerful impact on educational policy and curriculum development since before the 1800s” (p. 296). Carter and Goodwin (1994) and Tate (1997) contended that such a racial inferiority paradigm, which has persisted in U.S public education historically and contemporarily and is discussed in this paper, continue to operate in current contexts that contribute to the “gaps” upon which so many educators often gaze. Further, Kendi (2019) argued that “The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised” (p. 101), as it implies that academic achievement accurately reflects disparities of intelligence amongst students across racial groups. Simply put, Kendi (2019) stated, “To believe in a racial hierarchy is to believe in a racist idea” (pp. 101-102). Ultimately, the focus that I purposefully and explicitly argue for in this research is a critical and race-conscious exploration of the roles and impacts of whiteness and of majoritarian White teachers, and how they/we contribute to and impact efforts towards more racial equity in K-12 public education in the U.S.

However, for the sake of clarity and explicitness, I would also like to directly state that even with flawed tools of assessment and measurability, students of Color have
historically been (and often continue to be) underserved academically, socially, and emotionally in K-12 public education. Regarding academics, while standardized testing and an overreliance on academic assessment data invites many skeptics, standardized testing continues to be widely referenced as quantifiable proof of inequitable educational outcomes. It is worth noting that as of 2022, a Google search for "achievement gap" yielded about 1,980,000,000 results, all available in just 0.46 seconds. To put the “achievement gap” into a historical and contemporary context, when analyzing student reading and math performance data in the U.S. dating back to 1965, Hanushek (2016) found that if we continue to close the Black-White achievement gap at the same rate as we have in the last 50 years, it will be roughly 250 years before the math gap closes and about 150 years until the reading gap closes (Hanushek, 2016). This is not only problematic, but deeply troublesome and wholly unacceptable. We can’t wait until 2267 for racial educational equity in math, or until 2167 for reading. Nor will we.

Regarding social and emotional outcomes, school discipline and behavioral data analyses of preK-12 public education in the U.S. consistently confirm that a disproportionate number of students receiving behavior-related office referrals and suspensions are students of Color, especially when they are with White teachers, which is most of the time (Anyon et al., 2014; Dee, 2005; Downer et al., 2016; Gilliam et al., 2016). Further, having more Black and Latino/a/x educators increases Black students’ educational expectations, and having more Latino/a/x educators increases Latino/a/x students’ connectedness to school and their educational expectations (Atkins et al. 2014). Additionally and with regard to inequities for teachers of Color in K-12 public education,
teachers of Color leave the teaching profession each year at a rate 24% higher than their White peers (Easton-Brooks, 2013), and while much of the research on teacher attrition and retention focuses on economic and professional stresses of the teaching profession, limited research has connected the (often hostile) racial climates in schools with the professional experiences and retention of teachers of Color (Kohli, 2018). Further, institutional racism operating in schools (i.e. policy, infrastructure and hiring, curriculum, schoolwide practices, tracking), and more micro-level racism operating on an interpersonal basis such as in personal and peer relationships, can be internalized by both teachers and students of Color (Kohli, 2018; Huber et al., 2006). Moreover, interpersonal racism, mainly in the form of colorblindness and microaggressions, contributes to schools being dehumanizing spaces that ignore the histories, strengths, and struggles of both students and teachers of Color (Kohli, 2018). Kohli and Pizarro (2022) also asserted that because teacher education programs at the university level avoid discussions of race and racism, teachers of Color are hired to teach race and racism among “race-evasive colleagues and predominantly White students,” and that ultimately teacher education programs are “structured for teachers of Color to experience racial stress and harm” (p. 1).

Ultimately, with a disproportionate majority of positions of power and authority in the U.S., as well as positions of power in the K-12 educational system being predominantly White, there is not compelling evidence that more of the same in education today, including an uncritical and more objective and neutral view of race and racism, will lead us to more racially equitable outcomes. This old problem will require
perpetually shifting thinking, and critical and pragmatic thinking at that. In this research, I take a critical look at K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, and I explore the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in the work, building from the foundational work of critical race theory and critical whiteness studies.

Additionally, please allow me to clarify that in this review, I will intentionally differentiate between White people, white supremacy, and whiteness. More specifically, while white supremacy is conceptualized as a system of economic, political and cultural domination (Mills, 1994; 1997), alternatively, whiteness will be conceptualized as a social power and ideology that normalizes and centers White peoples’ position, perspective, subjectivity, emotionality and affectivity (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Simply put, as Malcolm X once said, “...white-ness is a state of mind, not a complexion” (X quoted by Hare, 2002, p. 9). The separation of race and belief, of White and whiteness, is specifically why Matias (2016) clarified in the author’s note of Feeling White: Whiteness, emotionality, and education, that she intentionally capitalized White as a race, but since whiteness is a state of being that is beyond one’s race or identity, it would be written in lowercase (a lead I will follow as a White writer writing about whiteness). Further, I will also draw from Matias and Boucher (2021) and will purposely capitalize ‘of Color’ when referring to individuals and communities of Color in an effort to challenge the normalization of whiteness.

Moreover, by mostly focusing on the history, roles, responsibilities, and impacts of White educators in racial equity work in U.S. education, I acknowledge the very real risk of centering whiteness, including my own, and thus further marginalizing teachers,
students, and communities of Color. However, at the heart of this project is an intentionality to prioritize the experiences and voices of seven Black and Black biracial project participants and educators, and to use my White male voice, skin, and social capital to attend to the unignorable influence and pervasiveness of whiteness and white supremacy in U.S. education. Addressing whiteness and supremacy requires both intentional naming and interrogation, and the centering of counternarratives. Put differently, the cycle of inquiring, listening, acting, reflecting, and repeating seems obligatory for those committed to upending the systemic network of racial marginalization and oppression. As a White man, I acknowledge that historically and contemporarily the “status quo” exists as a result of systemic inequities that have always unfairly benefited White people. And let me be clear, I say this not out of shame or guilt in being White, but out of a sense of heightened responsibility, as a White man and educator, to learn more and do better to interrupt the persistence of racial injustice and inequity in U.S. public education.

By orienting this work on the shoulders and foundations of transformational work and scholars in critical race theory and critical whiteness studies, with an intentionality to center the work of critical scholars of Color, I explore the ordinariness, stability, and permanence of racism in the U.S. (Bell, 1992), while striving to create space for critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Applebaum, 2017). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that this project and learning comes from my second-hand understanding of the visceral nature of racism, an acknowledged limitation due to authorship through a White male lens. When I speak of the ills and harms of racism, in its many insidious
forms, I acknowledge that I speak from cognitive and vicarious knowledge, not personal knowledge. However, I will also explore and detail my first-hand understanding of the potential for more commitment and responsibility from White educators in racial equity work in schools, as well as my own experiences as a teacher and administrator in racial equity work in education.

On top of that, I want to highlight one of the major complexities of this research on the roles and impacts of White educators in school based racial equity work. There is limited research that looks across the U.S. at the number or percentage of schools operationalizing sustained, systemic racial equity work in a systematic way (supported in policy and funding) as opposed to a localized or episodic way (i.e. schools with equity-driven educators or with sporadic professional development). Perhaps that is because it would be very challenging to measure due to a variety of factors: How would racial equity work be qualified? Quantified? How would the departure of a teacher-leader or administrator that was passionate about racial equity change the school’s commitment? With that said, would a commitment to racial equity work be able to be measured by self-reporting or other similar inputs? Or should we require actual outcomes to demonstrate a commitment to racial equity, and outcomes for both students and educators of Color?

The lack of research and the debatable validity and reliability of data measuring schools’ racial equity work and commitment makes research on it admittedly difficult (Gorski, personal communication, March 18, 2020). However, what is attainable is to consider and center the individual and collective experiences of seven Black and Black
biracial educators in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest and to learn more about their experiences and ideas on school-based racial equity work.

Ultimately, my goal in this project is to seek a deeper and more critical understanding about school-based efforts towards more racial equity, and the perhaps varying roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in school-based racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest - to ultimately move from what has been to what could be with regard to White educators’ responsibility in school-based racial equity work. Through this research, I hope to rouse the consciousness of, recruit, and retain racial equity-minded educators, especially White majoritarian ones, to more responsibly and responsively engage in the important work of building forward towards more racial equity in public education. I acknowledge that there is no objectivity in this quest or in my perspective, and my goal in this work is an attempt to provide a variety of perspectives and insights, including my own, however limited. Moreover, in *The making and unmaking of whiteness*, Rasmussen, Klinenberg, and Wray (2001) argued that racism does not have to be permanent, despite it being historically and deeply entrenched, and that if White people made race and racism, and whiteness, perhaps they can unmake them too. There are implications here, I believe, in K-12 education as well.

Finally, while this is not a history paper, this project leans on historical and legal precedents and policies that contributed to current racial inequities in U.S. K-12 public education, and I highlight that history alongside current realities to argue for more critical research on the matter and new ideas regarding potential next steps in K-12 public education. Simply put, I highlight the history of racism in education to better
contextualize racism in education today, and to begin to explore what racial equity work is needed, and what barriers exist to achieving more racially equitable outcomes.

The Mission of U.S. Public Education

It is important to begin with the stated mission of the current U.S. Department of Education’s (USDE), which reads “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 1). The USDE’s stated commitment to “equal access” is listed under the department’s dedicated tasks, which include policy oversight regarding financial aid, research on educational issues, and “Prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education” (para 1). The specific mention of discrimination along with ensuring equal access are the only elements of the mission that have race-specific implications. Outside of those elements, the mission is arguably very race neutral, which then makes it very difficult to intentionally and purposefully target and eliminate racial disparities and inequities.

Further, the majority of the core elements of the USDE mission regarding academic achievement, excellence, and global competitiveness are directly connected to, and arguably cultural artifacts of, two historical acts and precedents in U.S. history: the Soviet launch of Sputnik (1957) and the USDE’s report to the nation and the secretary of education, A Nation at Risk (1983). I believe it is important to understand these two events as they shine a light on the current state of and approaches to K-12 public education in the U.S., as well as how and why its “excellence” is measured.

Historical Precedents in U.S. Public Education
In 1957, the Soviet satellite(s) named Sputnik spotlighted both Russian advances in aerospace and consequently a perceived shortcoming of U.S. science and technology. After Sputnik, “Suddenly, an institution which had been a source of national pride [U.S. education] became the scapegoat for national failure” (Herold, 1974, p. 144). Consequently, many U.S. citizens (and U.S. media) began to associate scientific and technological advances with public welfare and national defense, and thus when Russia beat the U.S. in the space race, the perceived shortcomings of U.S. education required a national response (Herold, 1974). A year after Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (1958), which increased funding for education, and thus the cycle of using a “focusing event,” in this case Sputnik, to spotlight a national problem (education and safety) has been repeated for decades since (Powell, 2007, para. 7). Bracey (2007) claimed that “the schools never recovered from Sputnik. Sputnik wounded their [schools’] reputation and, as the scab formed, something else always came along to reopen the lesion” (para. 14).

Following Sputnik, there was a marked U.S. educational policy shift to one more driven by data and increased standardization based on the U.S. fear of falling behind in international competition, as is even cited in the current USDE mission with regard to “global competitiveness.” In other words, after Sputnik, the U.S.’s educational response was to pursue increased expectations and improved science and technology education based on the belief that U.S. military and economic strength could be no stronger than the U.S. educational system (Herold, 1974). In 1956, *U.S. News & World Report* covered “What went wrong with U.S. schools,” and in 1958, the cover of *Life* magazine featured a
five-part series “Crisis in Education” (Bracey, 2007). Ultimately, Sputnik led to the U.S. educational system “being subjected to one of the most penetrating periods of criticism and re-examination in our national history” (Herold, 1974, p. 147), and ultimately, there was a cause-and-effect relationship between Sputnik and educational reform and how it would be measured in the U.S. (Cha, 2015).

A generation later, the educational policy *A Nation at Risk* (1983) under the Reagan administration set a clear precedent for the ongoing standardization of U.S. public education, as it read, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). More specifically, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* argued that U.S. students were no longer internationally competitive, and that U.S. schools lacked rigorous curriculum and had low and inconsistent expectations. Additionally, the policy detailed current U.S. practices of shorter instructional time (as compared with other countries) and weak teacher qualifications. The recommendations from *A Nation at Risk* included some that were undeniably necessary and important, such as a 7 hour/200-220 day school year, increased funding, and a focus on improving leadership at the principal and superintendent level.

However, when viewed with a racial equity lens, there were also harmful aspects of *A Nation at Risk* that set the foundation for and secured racial disparities and inequities that still persist today. Amongst those were the centering of measurable performance standards (as measured by standardized tests), more rigorous discipline expectations
(which then and now disproportionately impact students of Color), and increased standards for teachers and teaching licenses (which ultimately limited teachers and teacher candidates of Color, to be discussed later). Each of these historical precedents impacted the direction and development of U.S. public education in fundamental ways, a trajectory based in neoliberalism of which we are still dealing with today in regard to racial “achievement gaps,” discipline “gaps,” and a persistently and predominantly White teacher force and system of public education.

**Neoliberalism in Education**

The role of (and debate over) measurable, data-driven, standardized education in U.S. public education is still prevalent, and whether U.S. policymakers frame educational policy efforts as “No Child Left Behind” (2001) or “Race to the Top” (2009), there always seems to be someone behind or on the bottom. The pursuit of “excellence” through “competitiveness” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 1) arguably created the achievement gap ideology and operating systems that guide much educational policy and reform today. Further, Stovall (2013a) contended that educational management organizations (EMOs), testing companies, and textbook publishers have all “capitalized on a broad and deep market to wrestle states to engage in practices that are more in compliance with the federal government than in the best interests of students and families” (p. 291). In such objective, “race to the top” rhetoric, it is important to consider what may be lost, and who may be left behind. The reality is that from a realist and empiricist sense, race is and always has been a predictor of getting to “the top.”
Further, Apple (2017) argued for a more critical look at the role of neoliberalism in education, specifically problematizing the notion that a more marketized and standardized education will lead to more accountable schools, administrators, and teachers; which will lead to improvement. More specifically, Apple (2017) stated that for those in education who prioritize “evidence” of measurable accountability on the performance of schools, teachers, and students, usually based on test score data, “there is just as much evidence that this too can create as many problems as it supposedly solves,” including that it often increases inequality (Apple, 2017, p. 150).

Similarly, Giroux (2019) claimed that neoliberalism “weaponises” education by using an “instrumentalist approach obsessed with measurement and quantification,” which leads to teachers “teaching for the test” (p. 35). Moreover, if school is a business, teachers are clerks, and students are consumers, the next generation of learners and leaders will not see nor learn “the ability to address how knowledge is related to power, morality, social responsibility and justice” (p. 36). Put differently, promoting the interdependent relationship between education and a democracy, and at that a racially just democracy, is a “political and pedagogical issue to imagine a future in which human needs take precedence over market considerations, while making clear how capitalism with its concentration of wealth and power in few hands produces modes of inequality and human misery” (Giroux, 2019, p. 39).

Further, and regarding capitalism and its entanglement with racism and the opportunity of transformational education, activist and professor Dr. Angela Davis (2020) asserted “I think it’s a mistake to assume we can combat racism by leaving capitalism in
place” (para. 34). Davis’ comment came at a time (June 2020) when the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurity, and individual and systemic racism were collectively having an immensely harmful impact as they continued to disrupt, complicate, and end lives, a disproportionate number of them impacting people of Color. And so, at this historic moment in U.S. history, in the wake of the perpetually shifting movement for Black lives and justice – which has been called the largest movement in U.S. history as it involved between an estimated 15 million to 26 million people in the U.S. alone (Buchanan et al., 2020) - do we shield our eyes from the bright light and historical weight and brutality of white supremacy? Moreover, Davis (2020) urged:

But I do think that we now have the conceptual means to engage in discussions… And I think this is a period during which we need to begin that process of popular education, which will allow people to understand the interconnections of racism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism. (para. 23)

Much is at stake in our racialized present reality and shared future, and I believe that the U.S. public educational system plays a significant role.

I remind the reader of the current USDE’s stated mission, “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 1). Does U.S. K-12 public education ensure equal access and excellence? For whom, and says whom? And according to what measures and tools? While speaking on intersectional inequalities including race, sexuality, class, and age, Lorde (1984) famously argued that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 112). Will using the same old tools of standardized testing and
discipline data lead to genuine change in education, and with regard to racial equity? Similarly, Tate (1997) asked “Are educational information classification systems assisting in the replication of preexisting thought?” And if so, what else can be done to “expand beyond indexing and research systems that confine thought to the traditional categories of educational discourse to include boundary-crossing scholarship related to civil rights and education?” (p. 226). Furthermore, do we have enough evidence to support such an optimistic mission and vision of public education “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)? It is my belief that racial equity in education will not result from any single, exceptional measure, nor will it result from using the same, ages-old assessment tools that arguably feed our fetishization of educational “gaps” we so often gaze and reflect upon. When considering who and what are our global and national educational priorities today, perhaps it is time to take a critical racial lens to the current state of educational “excellence” and the roots from which it came. Perhaps it is time to question educational policy reform that resulted out of a need for increased public welfare and national defense, and to reconceptualize the aim and mission of public education. Perhaps it is time to challenge who is at the table when such decisions are made. It is fair to say that public schools in the twenty-first century in the U.S. function in a quantitatively measurable, data-driven system. Despite the ambitious stated aim of “Every Student Succeeds” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), the reality is that student success (as measured by standardized assessments and graduation rates) can still
be predicted based on race, with more students of Color behind, more White students succeeding and at the top, and all students still being taught by predominantly White educators. So, what now? And what next? Apple (2017) argued that one of the most important analytic tools within critical cultural analysis, and in this case educational and racial analysis, is to focus on absent practices. In other words, what may be missing can be as important as what is there and what we have always focused on. Moreover, in *How to be an antiracist*, Kendi (2019) inquired:

> But what if, all along, these well-meaning efforts at closing the achievement gap have been opening the door to racist ideas? What if different environments lead to different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement? What if the intellect of a low testing Black child in a poor Black school is different from - and not inferior to - the intellect of a high testing White child in a rich White school? What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environments? What if we measured intellect by an individual's desire to know? What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students? (p. 103)

Similarly, Muhammad (2020) argued that the historical roots of literacy learning in Black communities as early as the 1800s were much more than just a set of skills, but “more expansive and advanced and included the goals of identity meaning-making and criticality” (p. 10). Part of the conversation, of course, includes our measures. However, part of the conversation also includes the deliverers and measurers, the educators, and the overall operation of and historical legacy of the system itself. When considering racial inequities in education, it is important to consider the educators and the state of racial diversity in U.S. public education, and an acknowledgement of why it is (and always has been) so White.

**The State of Racial Diversity in U.S. Public Education**
In the United States, of the approximately 332 million people, 60.1% are White alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Regarding K-12 educators in the U.S., the most recent estimates from 2018-2019 show that 79% of K-12 public school teachers are White and 47% of students are White (NCES, 2021). Previous estimates from 2016 showed that 82% of teachers were White, while 52% of the K-12 public school student population was White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). It is also worth noting that students of Color are expected to make up 55% of the student population by 2027 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; 2019b).

In the state of Oregon, 89.1% of K-12 public school teachers are White, while 61.9% of students are White (Oregon Department of Education, 2020), and in Washington, 86.8% of teachers are White while 50% of students are White (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020). Additionally, between 2016-2019, 100% of White students in Oregon had at least two or more teachers that shared their race/ethnicity in elementary, middle and high school. However, for students of Color in Oregon (including Black, Latino/a/x, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander), only 27% of elementary students, 45% of middle school students, and 63% of high school students have had at least one teacher who shared their race/ethnicity (Oregon Department of Education, 2017).

In the 2016 USDE “State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce” (SRDEW) report, the authors stated that the Department of Education is “dedicated to increasing the diversity of our [U.S.] educator workforce, recognizing that teachers and leaders of Color will play a critical role in ensuring equity in our [U.S.] education
system” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1). The authors went on to cite research from 2000-2015 that found that racial diversity among teachers can provide significant academic, social, and emotional benefits to all students, but especially students of Color. However, while the SRDEW report stated that we are stronger as a nation when people of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences work and learn together, the problematic truth is that historically, public education in the U.S. has maintained a predominantly White teaching force and has consistently underserved students of Color academically, socially, and emotionally.

McIntosh (1988) would likely identify the aforementioned racial disproportionality in teacher/student racial match as white privilege, as she noted that white privilege manifests if “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” (p. 31), and if “I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of Color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion” (p. 32). Leonardo (2004), however, would argue that white supremacy, not mere privilege, is in operation. More specifically, Leonardo (2004) insisted that, “In order for white racial hegemony to saturate everyday life, it has to be secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions, and policies that White subjects perpetrate on people of Color” (p. 137). In the social, political, and cultural contexts of education, those harmful and racist “acts, decisions, and policies” both created and sustained a predominantly White U.S. teacher force.

The language used in the USDE’s 2016 SRDEW report regarding the need for more teacher racial diversity signals a commitment to racially diversifying the teacher
force, an element of (but not solution to) achieving more racial equity in education, though the SRDEW also echoes the idyllic language of inclusivity and equality in the narrative of U.S. democracy, such as “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the notion of “We the People” in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution (1787). To say that all citizens in the U.S. are “equal,” and to say that the U.S. system of government inclusively represents and serves “the people” (both historically and contemporarily), is factually dishonest. Muhammad (2020) asserted that the political leaders of the late 1700s “claimed that the United States was the most liberated country in the world, but in truth, the country embodied racial discrimination and enslavement… [which] restricted Black people from becoming formally educated” (p. 24). Such contradictions are impossible to ignore.

Further, Delgado (1989) classified such dominant narratives regarding freedom and equality as “stock stories,” which really served as a mask to both oppression and a sense of responsibility or accountability from the dominant group (p. 2416). In his own words, Delgado (1989) argued, “The dominant group justifies its privileged position by means of stories, stock explanations that construct reality in ways favorable to it” (p. 2438). Stock stories, including ones regarding U.S. history and nostalgic notions of equality, can construct realities in ways that normalize, legitimize, and sustain unequal distributions of power and positioning (Tate, 1997). Such idyllic, dominant narratives ignore and even deny the realities of millions whose past and present lived experiences empirically demonstrate racial disparities whether looking at health, wealth, education, or even basic representation in positions of power. As Stovall (2013) noted, “the current
wave of ‘post-racial’ rhetoric flies in the race of the material realities experienced by communities of Color in the U.S. and across the planet” (p. 291). In reality, racial disparities in the U.S. are no accident, but mere consequences of the social, cultural, and political precedent set by our country’s racial history, including in education.

**Social, Cultural, and Political History of Race and Education in the U.S.**

When one considers the past and present exclusionary practices, racial segregation, and racist acts in the realm of U.S. public education - a system initially created by, of (about and made up of), and for established White students - it is less of a surprise that there are still stubborn and predictable racial disparities, including a historically and disproportionately White teaching force, in K-12 public education today. Moreover, I will make the argument that when looking at U.S. public education and at historically pernicious racial disparities for both students and staff of Color in a predominantly White system, “there are no accidents, only precedents” (Wise, 2016). More specifically, there are no *systemic* accidents without *historical* precedents, and by looking at a select handful of historical acts involving race and education in U.S. history, I argue that contemporary racial disparities are entrenched in the United States’ educational and historical roots. As we engage in a critical look at the roots of U.S. public education, and really of U.S. history, I remind the reader of James Baldwin’s (1955) statement, “I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (p. 9). My argument that race-based disparities require race-conscious responses towards more educational racial equity builds upon an honest and critical inquiry into U.S. racial history, especially in education.
To begin, let us not forget that Thomas Jefferson, one of our nation’s “founding fathers” and an architect of the U.S. philosophy of “freedom,” also a slaveholder, said himself, “I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness” (Jefferson, 1786). Clearly, education was valued in the fledgling U.S. nation and democracy. It is important to begin with the acknowledgement that Jefferson’s assertion regarding the need for education for “the people” was meant for established, White males, just as was the preceding and oft-cited statement that “all men are created equal” (Jefferson, 1776, para. 2). Further, in Notes on the state of Virginia, Jefferson was clear about his views on education and race. Education, he wrote, should produce “the best geniuses [who] will be raked from the rubbish” (Jefferson, 1787, p. 156). Further, Jefferson (1787) didn’t believe Black people were intellectually equal, as he wrote, “in reason [Black people were] much inferior,” and that he had “never… find a black had uttered a thought above the level of narration” (pp. 232-234).

Education in the U.S., both then and now, is still led predominantly by White educators, and it still sorts and segregates by race. Whether through exclusive tracking programs that benefit only the five percent of (mostly White) highest achievers (Gorski, 2017), or racially exclusive talented and gifted programs based in deficit ideology that continue to deny access to students of Color (Ford et al. 2001), U.S. education is still “raking” (read: separating) students, and better serving some over others (read: White over students of Color). Ultimately, due to the durable reality of inequitable racial
disparities in U.S. public education under a predominantly White teaching force, the call for more critical, productive, and informed research, as well as universal action and commitment to racial equity should ring loud and clear and with a sense of unapologetic urgency.

The social, cultural, and political roots of a disproportionately White teaching force and inequitable outcomes for students of Color in U.S. education can be traced all the way back to racist ideas and policies of the 17th century colonial legislature and educational practices. Because Black people had limited rights across many social, political, and educational institutions, Muhammad (2020) argued that Black communities relied upon themselves to create educational spaces, which included schools and educational societies. Additionally, in the early days of colonial education, in both the church and school classroom (including at Harvard, the first University in the U.S. in 1636), Kendi (2016) argued that several factors contributed towards the promotion of white supremacy in education.

For example, early teachings in colonial education “regarded ancient Greek and Latin literature as universal truths worthy of memorization and unworthy of critique” (Kendi, 2016, p. 16), including the work of Aristotle and his beliefs on Greek superiority and climate theory. Climate theory referred to the notion that “extreme hot or cold climates produced intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people who were ugly and lacked the capacity for freedom and self-government” (Kendi, 2016, p. 17). Similarly, Barber (2019) asserted that colonists relied on such “emergent theories” like climate theory and others that emphasized biological differences and human hierarchies
“to justify genocide, land grabs, and the commodification of human beings” (p. 388).

Further, Kendi (2016) argued that the high regard for such canonical works normalized human hierarchy and both directly and indirectly contributed to the rationalization of White human superiority in the U.S. colonies. However, in the U.S. colonial context, it wasn’t about Greek superiority, but Puritan superiority over Native Americans, Africans, and really any non-Puritans (Kendi, 2016). That said, and in the context of western power and perceptions of knowledge, Leonardo (2018) unforgettably argued that “Imperialism is one part cannons, another part canons” (p. 7).

Further evidence of the roots of racism in education can be found in the legislative acts in the 17th century colonial legislatures like the slave codes, which were laws that the colonial legislature passed that managed the way White people interacted with Black people and limited Black opportunities, including in education. For example, the slave codes between 1680 and 1682 made it illegal for enslaved Black people to travel without permits, own property, assemble in some public spaces, own weapons, and to receive an education (Harris, 1995). These slave codes cemented white supremacy and superiority in both principle and legal practice, and “were all encompassing and comprehensively invalidated the Black experience, assuring that Black people could not enjoy the rights of citizenship in the United States” (Nelson & Williams, 2019, p. 87). Additionally, slave codes were not “static documents,” meaning that they “shifted and morphed” with the desires and fears of White people in an effort to maintain hierarchy and maintain Black oppression (Nelson & Williams, 2019, p. 87). In truth, “Rights were for those who had the capacity to exercise them, a capacity denoted by racial identity,” and those rights
protected and allocated power, property, and the pursuit of happiness (Harris, 1995, p. 286).

One of the many dehumanizing slave codes was the denial of Black peoples’ right to receive an education. Tate (1997) detailed that for most of the 1800s, laws in many states limited the educational opportunities of Black people including a penalty for those who taught a Black person to read leading to fines, imprisonment, or flogging. DuBois (1935a) wrote of the slave codes:

The mass of the slaves could have no education. The laws on this point were explicit and severe. There was teaching, here and there, by indulgent masters, or by clandestine Negro schools, but in the main, the laws were followed. All the slave states had such laws, and after the Nat Turner insurrection in Virginia, these laws were strengthened and more carefully enforced. (p. 628)

The impact of the slave codes cannot be understated, and there were instances of those that worked around them, for example in North Carolina, “where persons who taught in Negro schools were assaulted, schoolhouses burned, and threats made against the lives of those engaged in the work” (DuBois, 1935a, p. 636).

Connecting the slave codes to education today, Nelson and Williams (2019) argued that the racially disproportionate over-disciplining of Black children, who then miss more school and receive less instructional time than White peers, are “reincarnations” of the slave codes (p. 120). Further, any and all limits to education and educational opportunities for Black learners, both historically and contemporarily, impact and harm “the educational, social, and occupational trajectories of individual Black students as well as the entire Black community” (Nelson & Williams, 2019, p. 119). Similarly, Carter and Goodwin (1994), argued that the historical (read: White) belief of
the intellectual inferiority of people of Color has had a strong and significant influence on educational policy and curriculum development since well before the 1800s. More specifically, Carter and Goodwin (1992) stated:

Because differences in achievement between White and non-White students were assumed to be genetically based, the inferiority paradigm allowed slavery to be condoned, which resulted in racial/ethnic groups, particularly Blacks and Indians, being considered uneducable and barred from formal or adequate schooling. (p. 296)

When looking at racial disparities in public education today, it is important to remember that there are no systemic accidents without historical precedents.

Ultimately, when Black learners were historically restricted and/or contemporarily excluded from literacy and education as a whole, they are then categorized by the system to falsely appear “at-risk” or “less than” in intellectual or educational lenses, which ultimately provides fodder for racist perspectives, ideas, and biases. Put differently, “consumers of racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many” (Kendi, 2016, p. 10). In the end, any and all limits to education for students of Color continues to deepen and cement white supremacy’s roots in the foundations of U.S. public education. These roots can either be reconstructed or deconstructed based on our collective actions, or inactions, today.

Furthermore, assaults on Black education continued into the 1800s and 1900s in the U.S. Drawing from the archives of the Freedmen’s Bureau, newspaper reports, and congressional testimony, Scribner (2020) found that 631 Black schools were burned or otherwise destroyed between 1864 and 1876 in former slave-holding states, with
hundreds more schools being damaged and destroyed throughout the 20th century. Additionally and disturbingly, Butchart (2013) documented thousands of teachers, including Black and White, male and female, and even teachers in the South and North, who were threatened, attacked, or killed for their work with Black students. The implications of these acts of terror and violence are not only dehumanizing, but they also carry immense educational, psychological, moral, and economic implications. However, amidst the stories of terror and violence are also stories of resilience, hope, boldness, and determination. For example, here in the Pacific Northwest in 1867, Black residents in Salem, Oregon organized and fundraised to open the first school open to Black students, which came to be called the Colored School. Less than a year later in early 1868, an adult Colored School was opened as well (Bell, 2022). Similar stories were happening in the post-Civil War South as well, for example in Georgia, where the state’s Black population deserves most of the credit for creating and sustaining opportunities for Black education (Butchart, 2002). Additionally, Butchart (2002) argued that “By the end of Reconstruction, the freed people of Georgia had built the foundations of a system of universal schooling” (Butchart, 2002, para. 10).

It should also be acknowledged that in 1895, W.E.B. DuBois became the first Black biracial person to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, signifying an outlying example of disrupting the system. DuBois went on to write about the challenges of a racist educational system, specifically about racial segregation in schools. DuBois (1935a) noted that White schoolhouses were far superior to Black schools, and that they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita. DuBois (1935b) also asserted that a
racially integrated school was the broader and more natural choice over segregated schooling, however he feared the reality of racially integrated schools with “unsympathetic [White] teachers… and no teaching of truth concerning Black folk” (p. 335). While DuBois (1935b) insisted that he did not support racially segregated schools, he argued that a separate Black school, “…where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black… is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon [in forcibly integrated White schools]” (p. 335). Ultimately, DuBois’s fears of integrated schools became reality as he recalled repeatedly seeing “…wise and loving Colored parents take infinite pains to force their little children into schools where the white children, white teachers, and white parents despised and resented… neglected or bullied [them].” He continued, “such parents want their child to ‘fight’ this thing out, but, dear God, at what a cost!” (DuBois, 1935b, p. 331).

It is also important to understand how acts of systemic racism in the 20th century have historically disallowed the development of a more racially diverse teaching force in the U.S. For example, while the landmark Brown v. Board Education (1954) case legally desegregated U.S. schools, a momentous civil rights victory, Tillman (2004) called the displacement of Black educators after Brown v. Board an “…extraordinary social injustice,” and wrote that “The wholesale firing of Black educators [after Brown v. Board] threatened the economic, social, and cultural structure of the Black community, and ultimately the social, emotional, and academic success of Black children” (p. 280). Post Brown v. Board, previously Black-only schools were disproportionately
“stigmatized as undesirable educational settings” and closed by White school boards without regard to the Black communities’ voices or perspectives (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993, p. 47). This is an example of white supremacy in action, and as Allen (2004) asserted, “We can see evidence of this dysfunctional structure when whites blame people of Color for their own victimization under white supremacy” (p. 127).

For specific and contemporary evidence of this dysfunctional structure, look no further than the closure of predominantly Black schools by predominantly White school boards for failing to thrive amidst underfunding, stigmatization, and neglect in my birth town of Chicago and the school district where I worked as a classroom teacher, Chicago Public Schools. In 2013, the Chicago Public School Board cited low test scores and low enrollment, as well as underutilization and under-resourcing, as the evidence needed to close 49 Chicago public schools. Of those 49 schools, 88% of the thousands of Chicago students who were impacted were Black, 90% of the schools were majority Black, and 71% had majority Black teachers (Ewing, 2018). There are problems when we have unstandardized wealth and resource distribution and thus unstandardized educational opportunities, and standardized definitions and processes for measuring success.

Further, Stovall (2013a) referred to this ineffective educational governance in Chicago as a “politics of desperation” (p. 33); when educational governing bodies like central or district offices and other state agencies use strategic marketing tools, like school choice, to garner support in their vision of educational improvement, in this case closing what are deemed “failing” public schools. Further, Stovall (2013a) argued that “this strategy targets racially and economically marginalized groups facing uncertainty in
education and housing, and who therefore attempt to navigate a set of choices that they have had little say in defining” (p. 34). Stovall (2013a) closed his article Against the politics of desperation: Educational justice, critical race theory, and Chicago school reform, with a nod to Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) notion of critical hope, “a hope rooted in the material realities of those who are working to collectively address and transform their conditions” (p. 43) and the potential of more sustained critical race praxis in education to engage with and alongside affected communities in praxis towards more transformative education and equity (which will be discussed in more detail in chapter two). Such a critical race approach is a strong example of more informed, critical, and strategic K-12 racial equity work in U.S. public schools.

The aforementioned example of public school closures in Chicago is important to connect to the notion that there are not contemporary accidents without historical precedents. The loss of Black schools and Black teachers that was incurred post-Brown v. Board decreased and limited the racial diversity of the U.S. educational teacher force and system. More specifically, in the eleven years following the Brown v. Board decision, from 1954-1965, over 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in twenty-one southern and southern-bordering states lost their jobs in education (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Further, Dr. Leslie Fenwick, Dean Emerita of Howard University, stated that in the aftermath of Brown v. Board, “We decimated the black principal and teacher pipeline,” and that “It is the unfinished promise of Brown that we have not integrated our faculty and school leadership” (Will, 2019). More specifically, using public enrollment and census data from the 1960s on, Oakley, Stowell, & Logan (2009) found that after Brown
vs. Board, there were clear decreases in the size of the Black teaching force in the South - due to there being no law protecting Black jobs in education - and only very modest increases in the North. Due to the harsh losses of Black jobs in education and Black schools, perhaps “Brown was more of a civil rights decision than an education decision” (Tillman, 2004, p. 285). Moreover, yes, Brown v. Board helped formally establish the unignorable truth that separate was not equal, as was previously the historical and legal precedent following the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). However, Brown v. Board also led to the “extraordinary social injustice” of displacing Black educators which, as stated previously, “threatened the economic, social, and cultural structure of the Black community, and ultimately the social, emotional, and academic success of Black children” (Tillman, 2004, p. 280).

Additionally, Brown and Jackson (2013) argued that Brown v. Board “while politically expedient, provided few if any tools for significant social change” (p. 21), and without such tools, “the status quo would inevitably revert to a pre-desegregation era” (p. 21). Such tools could be in the form of racially-conscious work on school curriculum, instruction, assessment, climate, and a myriad of other educational topics and areas of focus connected to racial equity, which I would argue can and should be part of school-based racial equity work. Ultimately, given that many Black schools were closed by White school boards, Hudson and Holmes (1994) put it simply: “The message transmitted by the Brown decision, and by the desegregation strategies implemented to carry out its mandates, implied that the White education system was intrinsically better than the Black education system” (p. 389). Also, at play in the Brown v. Board decision
was Bell’s (1980) notion of interest convergence, which contended that there were converging interests for White people and their political and economic interests at play in the *Brown v. Board* decision. Interest convergence will be discussed in detail in chapter two as a tenet of critical race theory; however, it is important to establish the incredible legal implications of *Brown v. Board*. Further, Dudziak (1988), as cited in Tate (1997), put it well:

> After Brown, the State Department could blame racism on the Klan and the crazies. They could argue that the American Constitution provided for effective social change. And, most importantly, they could point to the Brown decision as evidence that racism was at odds with the principles of American democracy. (p. 119)

Despite *Brown* being a tangible example of an attempted constitutional protection against racial discrimination for Black U.S. citizens, Bell (1980) and other empiricists and realists argued that *Brown* never actualized its goal of equality, as evidenced by (still) racially segregated schools, demographic patterns, white flight, and unequal racial outcomes in education today.

Furthermore, K-12 classrooms in the U.S. are still overwhelmingly taught by a predominantly White teaching force and still do not produce equitable academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students or teachers of Color. This racial and educational reality is even further complicated by the fact that “Black and Latino students are more segregated today in the 21st century than they were in the late 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement” (Thompson-Dorsey, 2013, p. 534). As history continues to tell us a story of forward progress and backwards regress, for example from the slave codes to DuBois, or *Brown v. Board* to present-day racial segregation in schools, can we at least
acknowledge that racial educational equity is and will continue to be a real struggle that requires collective acknowledgement and action? And that continued and sustained universal action towards more racial equity is necessary?

Additional evidence of the roots of racial disproportionality in the U.S. public education teacher force can be seen as the number of Black university students in the U.S. majoring in education declined by 66% between 1975 and 1985, and between 1984 and 1989 an estimated 37,717 teaching candidates of Color (including 21,515 Black educators) were “eliminated as a result of newly installed teacher certification and teacher education program admissions requirements” (Hudson & Holmes, 1994, p. 389). Further, Hudson and Holmes (1993) argued that states and independent groups continued to push teacher certification requirements that “serve to ‘filter out’ minority teacher candidates” (p. 391), instead of connecting certification requirements with student outcomes and looking more critically at teacher certification tests as a measure. More specifically, as related to teacher certification testing, King (1993) asserted that “because there is no established research definition with respect to the absence of test bias as it relates to gender and cultural groups” (p. 140), and because there is little research actually connecting teacher certification test score proficiency to actual teacher competency, King (1993) believed that makes a case for the reconsideration of the validity and worth of test score proficiency as a whole.

Ultimately, teacher certification testing contributed to the decrease of teacher candidates of Color, as well as student teachers of Color who completed their teacher preparation programs. Close to 30 years ago but still clearly relevant today, King (1993)
asked “How are the various educational reform initiatives incorporating the diverse experiences and the perspectives of African-American and other teachers of color?” (p. 143). Additionally, it is also important to note that Black teachers represent 7% of the teaching force in U.S. public education, with Black males representing a mere 2% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). There is still work to do, and not just in racially diversifying the teacher force, but in creating school communities and schools that are truly inclusive and representative of the students they serve, and in creating and sustaining formal commitments to racial equity work and more racially just outcomes.

In addition to Brown v. Board (1954), which overturned the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) decision and determined that separate was not equal, there was another precedent-setting Supreme Court case in 1976, Washington v. Davis, that put racial discrimination, certification testing, and intent and impact on trial. Before getting into details of Washington v. Davis (1976), and while in chapter 2 I discuss more on the role and entanglement of law and racism, it is important to briefly note that because laws produce racial power, laws also “continue to reproduce the structures and practices of racial domination” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxv).

With that said, Washington v. Davis (1976) was a case from Black police officers in the District of Columbia Police Department that challenged the use of a written civil service exam designed to test reading, comprehension, verbal ability, and vocabulary - an exam that Black applicants were much more likely to fail than White applicants. It is important to briefly note that police officers, similar to K-12 educators, represent another historically and disproportionately White profession in the U.S., as many major police
forces are still much whiter than the communities they serve (Keating & Uhrmacher, 2020).

One could view *Washington v. Davis* in two different ways with regard to racial discriminatory intent and impact. With regard to impact, *Washington v. Davis* could be judged by the fact that the certification tests had a discriminatory effect on Black applicants and thus could be seen as unconstitutional. With regard to intent, the fact that Black applicants did worse on the exam may be viewed as unfortunate, though it could be argued that the tests were not unconstitutional or illegal.

In the end, the U.S. Supreme Court found that even if laws have a racially discriminatory effect, or impact, if the laws were not originally adopted to explicitly advance a racially discriminatory purpose, or intent, said laws were deemed valid under the U.S. Constitution. In other words, if a racist outcome was not deemed the *intent* of a law (which is hard to legally prove), even if the *impact* was racist, said law was and is valid under the U.S. Constitution. With this legal precedent that prioritizes racial intent over racial impact, and given the history of white supremacy in law and racial inequity in education, what then are the next steps in achieving more equitable racial outcomes and equity in our communities and schools? Additionally, the court’s ruling meant that institutions could legally establish measures as a way of judging one’s merit or quality, without a lens of cultural and/or racial bias in a historically white-centric system, similar to what was previously discussed with teacher certification and student standardized testing. Ultimately, Brown and Jackson (2013) stated “The Court concluded [in
Washington v. Davis] that discrimination is the result of actions that are motivated by a discriminatory intent,” which is hard to legally prove (p. 14).

Brown and Jackson (2013) also connected the Washington v. Davis decision to Freeman’s (1978) notion of the prioritization of the perpetrator’s perspective. More specifically, Washington v. Davis “represented the courts choosing the perspective of the perpetrators regarding what is considered discrimination over that of the victim,” and that asking victims to “prove discrimination” is both problematic and “difficult, if not impossible” (p. 16). Further, while the perpetrators may be able to conceal discriminatory intent, the impact of racial discrimination and inequality is still suffered by the victims of it, regardless of intent (Brown & Jackson, 2013).

In the realm of education, the implications from Washington v. Davis are many. For example, legally prioritizing intent over impact solidifies the reality that despite the extent of racially inequitable outcomes, and despite the extent of school policies and practices that have disproportionately negative impacts on students of Color, “federal courts will tend to view such outcomes as the unfortunate result of racially neutral decision making” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 15). This means that stubbornly persistent educational inequities that have racially disparate impacts on students and staff of Color are up to individual schools and districts to address and dismantle. Could this mean that racial equity work in schools is, perhaps, the main avenue forward? After all, the list of educational policies, procedures, and practices that could be more equitable by critical analysis with a racial equity lens is long, and could include but not limited to: standardized testing and high-stakes testing, teacher certification testing, school
discipline practices, seniority to determine layoffs (in a historically and predominantly White field), academic tracking and talented and gifted program opportunities and representation, and the overall challenge of under-resourced and “low-achieving” schools that face closure (like in Chicago) - schools that historically are disproportionately comprised of students of Color (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Stovall, 2013a).

Ultimately, Black school closures by White school boards, the loss of Black teachers and teacher candidates, and racial disparities in the results of teacher certification tests are all examples of legally-backed racist acts under predominantly and historically white institutional control - all manifestations of white supremacy. Such systemic racist acts, rather than and more so than the actions of individual actors who have historically borne the blame (i.e. Black teachers or Black schools), lie at the root of the U.S. racial inequity in education (Kendi, 2016). As stated earlier, Black teachers represent only 7% of the teaching force in U.S. public education, with Black males representing a mere 2% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). When this historical and contemporary reality that is rooted in racist acts and policies is universally accepted as truth and a problem in practice, and when you also consider the historical and contemporary inequities in academic and social emotional outcomes for students and teachers of Color, the need for urgent action and more critical research is simply indisputable.

Consider that the aforementioned racist acts in U.S. public education would not carry such historical weight and visceral effect without the legal authority and institutional control that backed them and continue to back them. As DiAngelo (2018)
argued, “authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it [authority and control] becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically” (p. 21). A historically White teaching force perpetuates the historical, durable reality of white supremacy in education. In order to stop the (re)production of historically inequitable experiences and outcomes for students and staff of Color in a predominantly White-led educational system, this research purposefully explores the role(s) and impact(s) of whiteness and White educators in school-based racial equity work.

**Rationale for Research**

To clarify, while I wholeheartedly believe that having more teachers of Color is an important element of dismantling white supremacy and racial inequity in U.S. public education, I want to be clear that I believe White educators and leaders have a significant responsibility in repairing educational racial inequities at institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. I want to be explicit so as not to place the burden of an inequitable educational system on the shoulders of teachers and administrators of Color, nor to presume that all teachers of Color want to be counted on or relied upon to play some sort of racial equity/justice role in their schools.

Additionally, in the same way many U.S. schools are hostile to students of Color, they are also hostile to teachers of Color (Kohli, 2018), and thus the idea of correcting that hostility by bringing in more teachers of Color to face that hostility, let alone fix it, is wholly problematic. Delgado (1995) critiqued the idea that a “diverse workforce” and “role models” of Color within predominantly White institutions can pave the way to
better outcomes for future individuals and communities of Color. More specifically, Delgado (1995) argued that “role models” of Color are forced to be “assimilationists,” not “radical reformers” (p. 1227). Delgado (1995) also argued “role models” of Color are forced to lie to future generations of children of Color that they, too, can break the cycle of racial inequality, which the chances of doing are statistically and historically slim, as well as politically unpopular to many. Instead of arguing towards the dream of an idyllic, racism-free system of public education that is racially representative of the communities in which it serves, this research is geared towards majoritarian White educators developing more criticality, humility, and sociohistorical responsibility in racial equity work – myself included.

That said, there are approximately 3 million White K-12 teachers in the U.S., and with more positional power and racial privilege, I believe, comes more responsibility and accountability towards more racial equity in our schools and communities. That means more White educator responsibility and accountability to listening and learning about, teaching about, and committing to actions and policy (re)construction towards more racially just outcomes for both students and staff of Color. This is especially true in predominantly White institutions and school districts that serve student communities where the majority of students are students of Color.

**Learning with and from Black and Black Biracial Participants**

In this project, I center the experiences and voices of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest to take a critical look at school-based racial equity work, as well as a purposeful and critical look at the role(s) and impact(s) of
whiteness and majoritarian White educators in the work. Before I get into more specifics on the rationale for this research, and while more detailed information on my research methodology and process of identifying and learning with the project participants is explained in chapter three, I would like to be clear in explaining five reasons for my intentional choice to work and learn with and alongside Black and Black biracial educators, especially in the Pacific Northwest.

First, my most meaningful and impactful personal and professional experiences with/in racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest have been most profoundly shaped in a neighborhood in northeast Portland – previously a historically Black neighborhood before drastic White gentrification - where I was an assistant principal between 2015-2018. In 2008, the school I worked at served a student population that was approximately 60% Black, and in 2021, the percentage of Black students was 17%. White gentrification was deeply entrenched in the fabric of the community, and as I developed relationships and more trust within the community, many Black families and community members spoke openly and honestly about the hurt and pain that came with losing their community, their neighborhood school, and part of their history. During my time in northeast Portland, I found my critical consciousness and racial identity perpetually shifting and evolving and I started to ask harder and more critical questions about race and equity, both of myself and my colleagues. I became more suspicious and ambitious - suspicious about racial equity work and how it was approached, who it was really for, and who it benefited and burdened; and ambitious in race-consciously reimagining who I was and who I wanted to become, and reckoning with how much I had to learn and do. It
was in these formative and life-changing years that I met and established relationships with many of the people who I later refer to in this section as my “critical mentors,” the majority of which are Black or Black biracial educators who helped inspire and shape this project. That said, this project centers the experiential knowledge and lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 129) towards addressing the operation of racism in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest.

Second, this project is deeply rooted in the scholarship and brilliance of Black critical race scholars, including in the field of education, as well as Black scholars on race and education, both historically and contemporarily. This is not to say that I do not lean on and reference many other dynamic scholars and perspectives in addition to Black scholarship, including critical White perspectives as well, though it is to say that this project is heavily influenced by Black scholarship. More specifically, I draw from and am deeply grateful to the prophetic work of Black critical race scholars including but not limited to Drs. Derrick Bell, Kevin Brown, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Adrienne Dixon, Jamel Donnor, Cheryl Harris, Darrell Jackson, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Zeus Leonardo, Marvin Lynn, Laurence Parker, David Stovall, William Tate, Beverly Tatum, Kendall Thomas, and Edward Taylor. Additionally, I draw inspiration and ideas from historical and contemporary Black race scholars including but not limited to James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Angela Davis, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Jessica DeCuir, Cynthia Dillard, Michael Eric Dyson, Chris Emdin, Geneva Gay, Lani Guinier, Zaretta Hammond, Janet Helms, bell hooks, Sonya Douglass Horsford, Cleveland Hayes,
Roberta Hunte, Walidah Imanisha, Ibram Kendi, Martin Luther King Jr., David Kirkland, Audre Lorde, Bettina Love, Darrell Millner, Gholdy Muhammad, Django Paris, Glenn Singleton, Shanté Stuart-McQueen, Carmen Thompson, Cornel West, Malcolm X, Chezare Warren, and Maisha Winn. My gratitude to these Black scholars, historians, educators, and change-makers is both limitless and indescribable, and I am also evermindful so as not to co-opt, nor appropriate or “take advantage” of their incredible contributions and ideas and making them seem as if they are my own. I aim to respect, amplify, and cite Black scholarship to my best ability, as well as center the experiential knowledge and lived experiences of the seven Black and Black biracial participants as the heart of this project.

Third, this project was born from a critical look at the racial history of U.S. public education, as I have attempted to summarize in chapter one, wherein I specifically highlight historical events and legislation that mostly impacted the education of Black individuals and communities in the U.S. Such references include but are not limited to the U.S. slave codes regarding education, Brown v. Board of Education, the ensuing and harsh losses of Black jobs in education (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Oakley et al., 2009; Tillman, 2004), and the historical and contemporary practice of predominantly White school boards closing predominantly Black schools (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Stovall, 2013a).

Fourth, this project is situated in the Pacific Northwest, and was authored in my home city of Portland, Oregon, which has been called “the whitest big city in America” (Semuels, 2016, para. 5). More generally speaking, Oregon has a deeply racist past and
“hidden history” (Imarisha, 2013; Camhi, 2020), one rooted in both white supremacy and specifically targeted anti-Blackness (Thompson, 2019). In this project, I outline how there are no systemic accidents without historical precedents, both in U.S. public education and in the history of the Pacific Northwest, specifically in Oregon. I discuss more of these connections regarding Oregon’s racial history and its impact on local efforts towards more racial equity in chapters four and five, and also draw from the participants’ experiences in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest.

Fifth, this project was situated in the winter and spring of 2021, in the midst of conceivably the largest movement in the history of the U.S. – the movement for Black lives and justice – which involved between an estimated 15 million to 26 million people (Buchanan et al., 2020). Racial tensions were high, especially so in my hometown of Portland, which had received national attention during the racial justice movement after having had a “protest streak” of more than 100 nights which included clashes with U.S. federal officers (Lambert, 2020), and debates on the roles and impacts of predominantly White activists, including the “Wall of Moms,” who strayed from the movement’s initial focus on Black lives and justice (Blaec, 2020). That said, this project was situated during a remarkable racial moment in the living and perpetually shifting history of the U.S, as well as a remarkable moment in Black history, which of course is U.S. history, too. The dynamic movement for Black lives and justice reoriented and focused a historical immediacy and need, in my humble opinion, for more interracial coalitions and actions guided by and from Black lives, voices, experiences, and brilliance at the center. I believe this moment also had (and continues to have) immense implications on what Tatum
(2016) called the “search for White allies and the restoration of hope” (p. 278), and the need for more interracial work and learning, which will be discussed in more depth in chapter five.

I should also clearly state that this project was not intended for me, a White researcher and educator, to ask Black and Black biracial educators how to be a better ally, or how to process my racial privilege. Ultimately, I agree with Gorski’s (2017) urging that educators seeking to threaten inequity must prioritize building coalitions with teachers who are different from them (in terms of race, but also other identities such as sexual orientation, gender, religion, first language, disability, etc.). Additionally important in those coalitions is that educators of intersectional privilege are careful “not to rely on others from historically underprivileged groups to teach me how to improve myself (which is, in and of itself, a practice of privilege)” (Gorski, 2017, para. 10). Therefore, in this project I center the experiential knowledge, lived experiences, and counternarratives of seven Black and Black biracial educators as first, foremost, and fundamental in efforts towards more racial equity in education. Additionally, this project is grounded in the belief that counter-stories hold an immense, transformative power and centrality (Delgado, 1989, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Matsuda, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, 2016), and that there is a potential and necessity of interracial learning, discussion, and action in racial justice work (DiAngelo & Flynn, 2010; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Ngounou & Gutiérrez, 2019). Finally, this project also acknowledges the strategic and responsive use of racial affinity spaces to do racial equity work both together and apart (Michael & Conger, 2009; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Souto-Manning,
All of these ideas will be explored - both critically and humbly - throughout this project, as I believe they all play an important role in building forward towards a more racially just and equitable future within and across K-12 public education.

I should also clarify that I do not aim to generalize about Black or Black biracial educators, and instead hope to amplify the tremendous range of experience, knowledge, ideas, and perspectives within and across the seven Black and Black biracial project participants’ experiences. I also hope to avoid generalization about White educators, and often critically interrogate my own White perspective, biases, and experiences, much more so in chapter three. Ultimately, while my argument may be complex in some places, at its core it’s a pragmatic call-in, not call-out, to majoritarian White educators like me. It’s an invitation, not an accusation, based on a critical race framework for nurturing cross-cultural alliances and coalitions with teachers and educators (Bright & Gambrell, 2016). This research is a call-invitation to White educators.

Unlike many similar studies on racial justice before it that discuss White roles and impacts but did not purposefully seek them out (Gorski & Erakat, 2019), this research includes an explicit focus on the roles and impacts of White teachers in K-12 school-based racial equity work. Just as critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and critical theory in general require a more direct inquiry into race and power relations, as well as social differentiations and outcomes, this research follows a similar race-conscious and critical path. I ask that you join me in this exploration with a critically suspicious gaze on my arguments, positionality, biases, and responsibility as a White male educator critiquing the predominantly White system that I myself am a part of.
Additionally, I ask that you hold that same critical, suspicious, and ambitious gaze on our shared, collective reality of a racially inequitable U.S. public educational system, your role, and what comes next.

**Complexities and Potential in School-Based Racial Equity Work**

As stated earlier, through this research I explore possibilities for school-based racial equity practice(s) regarding institutional and systemic reform, as well as considerations in regard to White educators’ intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Regarding institutional change, which is inextricably tied to national, state, and local priorities and funding, it is problematic to consider that historically and contemporarily “there have been no significant federal funds to address issues of race in the schools since the Reagan Administration eliminated the popular federal desegregation aid program [in 1981]” (Orfield, 2008, para. 10). Previously, racial desegregation aid was federally funded and supported teacher professional development, curriculum work, assisting students in addressing racial divisions in schools, and other race-related issues. If a stated priority of the 2022 U.S. Department of Education’s mission includes “Prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education,” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and the SRDEW report stated that “that teachers and leaders of Color will play a critical role in ensuring equity in our [U.S.] education system” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1), is it fair to ask how much of the USDE’s operating budget backs such commitments?

Further, Museus and LePeau (2019) asked “Why do we avoid conversations about the need for some people to make sacrifices in order to advance equity?” And if there is
evidence that suggests that educational institutions and leaders often adopt and cite missions and strategic plans that highlight values of diversity, equity, and inclusion that are *not* accompanied with adequate redistribution of resources and financial backing towards more equity, then what? (LePeau et al., 2018; Museus & LePeau, 2019)

To be clear, I do not intend to imply that there are any simple responses or solutions towards achieving more racial equity in U.S. public education. I do, however, believe that inaction, and even gradual incrementalism is unacceptable, as many race scholars and critical race scholars in education attest. Racial equity work in schools is complicated and hard, and that is precisely why it is non-negotiably and urgently necessary. Brooks et al. (2007) asserted that racial equity work in education must focus on access, proportional outcomes, advocacy, political change, and social and institutional change, all the while pursuing deeper and more contextual understandings of the very uniques of the culture, climate, and specific communities that public schools serve.

While school leadership can positively affect efforts towards more equity - especially a more fluid, distributed leadership model that changes from situation to situation that connects social justice to daily teacher practice - school racial equity work is filled with organizational barriers as well as deeply complex sociopolitical and sociopsychological dynamics (Brooks et al., 2007). This research is geared at better understanding the roles and impacts of our largest demographic of teachers in K-12 in the U.S. - White educators just like me.

There were approximately 3.7 million K-12 teachers in the U.S. in fall 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), and given that approximately 79% of K-12 public
school teachers are White (NCES, 2021), there are close to 3 million White teachers in the U.S. The collective influence of nearly 3 million classroom educators on our youth is incredible. Driver (2018) conceptualized the power and influence of U.S public education well:

On any given weekday, during school hours, at least one-sixth of the U.S. population (50+ million students, 3.7 million teachers) can be found in a public school, making it easily the single largest governmental entity that Americans encounter for sustained periods on a near-daily basis. (p. 15)

In this project, I highlight the roles and impacts, both intended and not, of our nation’s majority of (White) teachers in racial equity work.

Extending these ideas about the way forward towards more equity, Picower (2012) argued that since the year 2000, while more educators have turned to teacher activist groups as a means to create more liberatory educational environments and to fight increased inequality (including racism), the methods and means of such work are not universal, and are typically independently formed, organized, and outside of school (i.e. networks of teacher activist groups). Additionally, it is still unclear as to how teacher activism advances equity work at the systemic level, beyond the direct influence of individual teachers, as much of the relevant scholarly literature focuses on individual classroom efforts as opposed to looking at collective action, movement-building, and a sustainable, strategic, supported commitment to (racial) equity (Picower, 2012).

Therefore if, for example, school professional development plans, including but not limited to staff meetings and educators’ professional learning opportunities, are solely focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and not the realities of racial injustice
and how to actively work against those racial realities, what reason is there to believe that we will see more racial equity in our educational system at a systemic level?

**Racial Equity Detours in Education**

Even for schools and districts that commit to racial equity work, there is still much to consider. For example, it will come as no surprise to any educator that just because a school district sets a district priority, mission, or symbolic pillar, actions and sustained efforts can be in contrast to those priorities due to a variety of factors including (but not limited to) school-level building administration, building faculty and staff, funding allocations, and community involvement. Based on more than twenty years of experience working with schools and districts on issues centering around racial equity and social justice, Gorski (2019) conceptualized school-based racial equity detours that schools often take “create an illusion of progress toward equity while cementing, or even exacerbating, inequity” (p. 65).

Gorski (2019) worked from Olsson’s (1997) definition of detours as actions that White people take to protect privilege, and thus sustain and maintain white supremacy. In terms of creating more purposeful and authentic school-based racial equity movements, “if the most emphatic racial equity advocates feel silenced and less central to institutional culture than their equity resistant colleagues,” Gorski (2019) cautioned, “what we have from an equity point of view is a sick institution” (p. 56). Further, Gorski (2019) asserted that students experiencing racism cannot wait for schools and predominantly White teachers and districts to move at their own pace and comfort level in school racial equity work. Additionally, an equity “sick institution” is in operation when “emphatic equity
advocates often face harsher repercussions for their advocacy than equity heel-draggers face for their inaction” (Gorski, 2019, p. 57). Can you imagine what a school, district, or educational system would look and feel like if racial equity leaders and educators were in the majority?

Specifically, regarding Gorski’s (2019) four racial equity detours, he urged that these detours can do more damage than explicit racism, all the while consuming time, energy, and resources for the real, often neglected racial equity work. Put differently, the following racial equity detours are the “anti-anti-racism” (Gorski, 2019, p. 57). I will summarize these four racial equity detours as they are obstacles to more effective, meaningful, and transformational school racial equity work, and are important considerations in both this project and the path forward.

The first detour is “pacing-for-privilege”, (Gorski, 2019, p. 57), which occurs when racial equity efforts are positioned for “meeting people where they are when where they are is fraught with racial bias and privilege” (p. 58). This approach, while wholly ineffective towards addressing and combating actual racism, centers whiteness and White stakeholders and “coddles the hesitancies” of the aforementioned equity “heel-draggers” who really fear discomfort and desire social and emotional safety (p. 57). It is also important to consider that White “safety” in racial equity work is more about safety of reputation and perception than it is about literal safety. Put differently, if the “higher goal of understanding and fighting racism is exchanged for creating a safe space where whites can avoid publicly ‘looking racist,’ there is a problem” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 139). Ultimately, because safety and comfort are not the same thing, White people (and
really people of inter-categorical and intersectional privilege) must accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014).

The second detour is the “poverty of culture” (Gorski, 2019, p. 58), based on Ladson-Billings’ (2006b) assertion that culture is (incorrectly) used by those in power as a regular excuse for just about everything from academic failure to school discipline. Further, poverty of culture is operating when schools and teachers point to or blame their perceptions of students’ cultures instead of the potentially biased or racist policies and actions within schools and systems. For example, Gorski (2019) cited the example of disproportionate racial discipline data being interpreted as the result of a cultural and behavioral defect of students of Color, instead of being the result of the racial bias of the educators administering the discipline (Rudd, 2014). Until the shift from student deficits to systemic and institutional deficits happens, racial equity in our schools will remain elusive.

Building upon detour number two, the third detour is “deficit ideology” (Gorski, 2019, p. 58), or the notion of striving to “fix” problematic students through foci on constructs like grit, growth mindset, or even the zones of regulation and more objective trauma-informed practices. Focusing solely on the students and not the systems, on the individuals and not the institutions that truly marginalize students, “shifts the onus of responsibility away from schools and onto the very youth who are cheated out of equitable opportunity” (Gorski, 2019, p. 59). Put differently, perhaps instead of focusing on individuals and their symptoms, we need to focus on the sickness and the infecting atmosphere. Similarly and unforgettably, Guinier (2005) likened small and targeted
responses to individuals in toxic racial atmospheres to the idea of giving a little oxygen mask to a miner’s canary. Guinier (2005) shared:

...we see problems that come to our attention because they are associated with a visible and vulnerable group. And then we assume that those are the problems of the canary, rather than heeding the warning that those canaries are giving to us that it is actually the atmosphere in the mine that is toxic—not just for the canary but for the miners as well. (Guinier, 2005, para. 3)

What would it mean to focus our transformative educational reform improvement efforts and initiatives (and dollars) towards the educational environment, and the systems and institutions, and teachers, as opposed to “fixing” students? Tate (1997) argued that much educational research, as well as legal structures as a whole, come from an inferiority paradigm that was built on the belief that people of Color were biologically and genetically inferior to White people. Tate (1997) also cited assessments such as the early IQ studies as part of the (historical) problem.

Finally, the fourth detour in avoiding racial equity is “celebrating diversity” (Gorski, 2019, p. 59), which centers whiteness, again, by highlighting events like a Diversity Night or Diverse Friends Day which really “are crafted to help White students learn about diversity—not racism, but diversity—in ways that will be most comfortable for them” (p. 59). Such events centered on diversity often exploit and objectify students of Color, sometimes asking them to celebrate the same diversity and uniqueness that could simultaneously be making them feel silenced and invisible on a daily basis (Gorski, 2019). All of these detours, when taken together or individually, can provide many opportunities for critical reflection on our own educational practices and experiences, both professionally and personally.
Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to engage in a critical look at K-12 school-based racial equity work in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest, and to explore the roles and impacts of whiteness and of White educators’ in school racial equity work. In this study, I explore the following two research questions:

1) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report their experiences with/in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

2) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report the participation, role(s), and impact(s) of White participants in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

Theoretical Significance

While discussed in much more detail in chapter two, there are three key concepts that consistently (re)emerge throughout this project, the first being white supremacy in both society and education. I draw from Mills (1994) to define white supremacy as the “European [White] domination of the planet for the past several hundred years that has left us with the racialized distributions of economic, political and cultural power that we have today” (p. 108).

Next, I ground this research on foundational elements of critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness studies (CWS). CRT asserts that racism is “common” and “ordinary,” and part of the everyday experience for many individuals and communities of Color in the U.S., and that racism is part of “the usual way society does business” which benefits the dominant, White group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7). CRT also posits that there is an essential value in the first-hand histories, or counter-stories, of people of Color who have a “competence” to speak on race and racism in ways that White people
are not likely to know or understand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 10). Counter-stories are the heart of this project and its methodology, which prioritizes the lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest.

Additionally, CWS is a theoretical framework resulting from foundational work on race and racism (including both historical Black scholars and CRT). CWS focuses on the privileged racial identities of White people and how they act to secure racialized inequalities and operate within hegemonic contexts. Specifically in chapters two and five, I take a close and critical look at whiteness, which does not simply refer to an individual’s racial identity, but more refers to a state of being that is rooted in the “supposedly ‘commonsense’ beliefs that privilege White experiences, assumptions and interests” (Gillborn, 2008, p. 244). Further, I explore the hierarchical effects of whiteness in education, as Ladson-Billings (1998) argued, “in a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative, everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition” (p. 9). Chapter two also includes specific examples of K-12 school-based racial equity work, along with relevant and provocative considerations regarding the role and operation of whiteness, and examples of the role and impact of White educators and leaders in racial equity work.

Practical Significance

The lack of purposeful and explicit research on the roles and impacts of White participants in K-12 school-based racial equity work, and at that research that centers counter-stories and the experiences of people of Color, is something mostly missing from
the educational and scholarly literature, and something perhaps limiting the effectiveness and potential of school racial equity work in a predominantly White K-12 educational system. This research does not ignore the complexity of school racial equity work by simply and naively asking teachers of Color, “What can White teachers do to be better allies in racial equity work?” Instead, through interviews with seven Black and Black biracial educators (to be explained in further detail in chapter three), I center how seven educators perceived and reported the role and impact of White educators in school-based racial equity work. Ultimately, I explore the perceptions of the seven participants on the impact of White educators in racial equity work as more important than the intentions of White educators in the work.

In conclusion, the time to shine a critical light on school-based racial equity work and the roles and impacts of White participants, something mostly missing from the literature, has come. It is also time to seek more generative, productive solutions on how to achieve more racially equitable outcomes for students and teachers of Color. This research intentionally, explicitly, and purposefully explores majoritarian White educators’ actions and responsibility in school-based racial equity work towards the goal of a more racially just K-12 public educational system in the U.S.

**Summary of the Statement of the Problem and Application to the Study**

In this chapter, I outlined how K-12 public education in the United States, post *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching force and has persistently underserved students of Color in terms of academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Additionally, I shared several historical and legal
precedents in U.S. public education that have played a part in entrenching racial inequities that we still see in education today. Further, I outlined how K-12 school-based racial equity work is inconsistent, complex, difficult to measure, and that school-based racial equity work has not demonstrably created more equitable experiences or outcomes for students or staff of Color. This chapter concluded with the theoretical and practical significance of taking a more critical, suspicious, and ambitious look at the roles and impacts of White majoritarian educators in school-based racial equity work.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this second chapter, I feature four interconnected literature reviews. The first review covers the construct of white supremacy in society and education. The second, more in-depth review covers critical race theory (CRT), which strongly influenced this project and the design and methodology of the study. CRT tenets, methodology, and implications are also discussed further in chapters three, four, and five. The third, more brief review is of critical whiteness studies (CWS), which frames some of the discussion and takeaways regarding the roles and impacts of White educators in school-based racial equity work. CWS elements are also referenced in chapter four and five to help frame the discussion of whiteness and White educators in racial equity work. The fourth review covers literature related to school-based racial equity work in U.S. public education, as well as implications for White educators and allies in school-based racial equity work. Furthermore, I acknowledge that each of these subsections could, in and of themselves, be their own research projects.

Additionally, I offer my sincerest gratitude to the many brilliant and critical scholars of Color, past and present, whose work on race has transcended time and place, and whose work has set the foundations of my growing and perpetually shifting understanding of race, identity, and equity. Drawing from Matias and Boucher (2021), I use the word ‘critical’ when referencing critical scholars of Color to “avoid the oft-repeated trope that being a scholar of Color means ones believes in criticality,” and I also agree that “ideological and epistemological standpoints matter” (p. 14). Therefore, throughout this project I lean towards and center scholars of Color who are purposefully
critical to the operation of racism and white supremacy, especially in education. This project cites critical scholars of Color and their work frequently and attempts to use their own words as much as possible. For the purpose of this review, and of this research project in general, it is my belief that by providing a review of the aforementioned concepts, theories, and happenings in K-12 education, that such considerations and understanding may assist towards the development of more informed and critical action towards a more racially equitable educational system.

**White Supremacy in Society and in Education**

Before getting into specifics on education, racism, whiteness, and equity, it is important to start by conceptualizing the overarching systemic operation of white supremacy. For the purposes of this work, I will not refer to white supremacy and racist(s) or racism(s) as individuals or individual actions impeding the development of a more racially equitable educational system. Instead, I problematize white supremacy and racist(s) or racism(s) as ages-old systems of political, economic, and cultural control that historically and disproportionately benefit White people. For the purposes of this research, I define white supremacy, drawing from Mills (1994), as the “European domination of the planet for the past several hundred years that has left us with the racialized distributions of economic, political and cultural power that we have today” (p. 108).

In conceptualizing and interrogating white supremacy as a mode or system of domination, Mills (1994) proposed that to work towards the elimination of racism, we must collectively “map its …contours” (p. 131), and move back and forth between
empirical reality and abstractions, including but not limited to cultural studies, critical race theory, and social science research. There are some quantifiable elements of empirical reality with regard to the operation of white supremacy, such as racially disproportionate positional power, as well as economic and health well-being, while other elements connected to supremacy, such as critical race theory (to be discussed later), and counter-storytelling, focus more heavily on the abstractions of living and surviving in a system that was built for some and not for others. In terms of the systemic and structural nature of supremacy, Mills (1997) argued:

...racism (or as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties. (p. 3)

Ultimately, because there are stubborn and persistent markers of white supremacy that both quantify and qualify it, the debate over next steps must evolve from not if white supremacy is operating, but how it is operating, and what can/should/must we do about it.

It is also important to note that historically, positions of social, political, and cultural power and authority in the U.S. have been racially exclusive to White people at the expense of individuals and communities of Color, which is what Mills (1997) referred to as a “particular power structure of formal and informal rule” (p. 3). The empirical persistence of white supremacy in U.S. political, social, cultural, and educational institutions is seen below (Table 1).

### Table 1


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<table>
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<td>Ten richest Americans (seven of whom are among the ten richest in the world)</td>
<td>100 percent White</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States Congress</td>
<td>90 percent White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Governors</td>
<td>96 percent White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top military advisers | 100 percent White
President and Vice President | 100 percent White
US House Freedom Caucus | 99 percent White
Current United States Presidential Cabinet | 91 percent White
People who decide which TV shows we see | 93 percent White
People who decide which news is covered | 85 percent White
People who decide which music is produced | 95 percent White
People who directed the one hundred top-grossing films of all time, worldwide | 95 percent White
Teachers | 82 percent White
Full-time college professors | 84 percent White
Owners of men’s professional football teams | 97 percent White


If you are White like me, I ask you to consider what thoughts and emotions arise for you when reviewing the above statistics? How do the above statistics benefit or burden you? Further, what is the societal and personal impact and value of statistics such as these? As Harris (1995) so powerfully put it, “Although the existing state of inequitable distribution is the product of institutionalized white supremacy and economic exploitation, it is seen by Whites as part of the natural order of things, something that cannot legitimately be disturbed” (pp. 287-288). Such an invisible ideology, such a normative hegemony and racial, hierarchical system of supremacy, is perhaps what makes white supremacy so persistent and powerful – and so elusive to many White people. Further, institutional white supremacy is “a ghost,” Harris (1995) argued, a ghost that has “carried and produced a heavy legacy” that has shielded society to its very presence and power in sorting society and people through systemic racialized supremacy.

The framing of statistics that reference and portray people, and their real lives and dreams, are important to consider, especially for statistics on young people and students. In *Between the world and me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) observed:
It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing — race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy — serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience… You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (p. 10)

Coates’ award-winning text is powerfully written as a letter to his son, Samori, and it confronts the visceral, personal, and historical damages inflicted on Black bodies and lives from past and present racism(s) in the U.S., as well as the stability of systemic racism and the brutality of violent racism — two things near and dear to the racial history of the U.S.

Later in the text, Coates (2015) urged his son, “Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free… You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity” (p. 70). As a White man, I will never truly know or understand the impacts of such an immense burden, or what it feels like to bear the weight of the U.S.’s racial legacy, though I can seek to more deeply understand our country’s history, my family’s history, this present moment, and how they are interconnected. I can prioritize learning with and from the perspectives of people of Color, both past and present. I can talk and act with and alongside my White children, family, friends, and peers about race and history, and I can hold us accountable in helping to create a more racially just future. Ultimately, I can accept the responsibility and the call to action that comes with being a White man in the U.S. who claims to believe in better. After all, the future chapters of the U.S.’s racial history will be shaped by today, by our generation, and by our individual and collective actions or inactions.
The statistics cited above (Table 1) are beyond debate. When confronting statistics on white supremacy like these, White people (like me) can choose to walk away from them, to ignore them. Close the book. Open up a new tab. Scroll on. That is also one of many ways that white racial privilege manifests - the luxury of not having to think or even consider the role of race because of the seeming normality of the white (dominant and majoritarian) experience. White racial privilege, domination, and supremacy have always been at the expense of individuals and communities of Color, and that it is especially problematic when White people are beneficiaries, but do not feel they are “signatories” of supremacy (Leonardo, 2004, p. 165). Simply put, Leonardo (2004) asked, “if Whites do not assume responsibility for their history of White supremacy, then who can?” (p. 165).

As a White man in the U.S., I acknowledge that historically and contemporarily the “status quo” exists as a result of systemic inequities that have always unfairly benefited White people. Research and history confirm it. The voices and lived experiences of people of Color confirm it. The hereditary wealth and privileged opportunities that I’ve inherited are both entangled and unearned. Though again, I say this not out of shame or guilt in being White, but out of a sense of heightened responsibility, as a White man and educator, to learn more and do better to interrupt the persistence of U.S. racial injustice and inequality, especially in education.

Further, to best recognize the role and impact of race and racism(s), Leonardo (2009) asserted that racial dynamics and inequities are not “add-ons” when thinking about structures of society or commonsense, but rather, racial dynamics are “constitutive”
to daily life in the way they privilege certain groups (p. ix). Moreover, racial dynamics follow a “logic and a set of ‘unconscious’ rules and assumptions that disenfranchise people of Color in nearly every sphere of social life” (Leonardo, 2009, p. ix). Historical and contemporary white supremacy, which makes white racial hegemony, dominance, advantage, and privilege possible, requires rigorous interrogation, discourse, and action in both society and in education. In education, white supremacy can be conceptualized as a “hidden curriculum entrenched within schools” (Allen & Liou, 2019, p. 678), operationalized through organizational structures and predominantly White staff, systemic processes, certain curriculum and instructional choices steeped in whiteness and white positionality, and ideological beliefs and norms that normatively center whiteness. I will discuss this in more depth regarding the role of whiteness in education later in the chapter.

When considering white supremacy in both society and schooling, especially when challenging a predominantly white educational system and network of teachers, required first is a clear acknowledgement of the presence and persistence of white supremacy. After all, the collective work of dismantling white privilege and supremacy requires naming, and such naming “disrobes a whiteness that dresses in camouflage as humanity, unmasks a whiteness costumed as American, and fetches to center stage a whiteness that would rather hide in visible invisibility” (Dyson, 2018, p. x). By first naming white supremacy, something that does not want to be named nor historically has been named in predominantly White institutions like public education, the work to undo it requires a consistent and tangible personal, professional, pedagogical, and spiritual
shift. I say this as I continue, as a White man, on my own journey towards consciousness-raising.

Moreover, race consciousness matters. Through more open discourse on white supremacy, “the racial story unfolds, complete with characters, actions, and conflicts,” and the “resolution of the plot transforms into a discreet and pedagogical possibility” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 150). In reviewing both the conceptualization of white supremacy in society and education, I agree with Leonardo (2009) that such discourse and intentional action provides a possibility, an opportunity, for those White educators who are ready to engage in the hard personal and professional journey that true racial equity work requires. I believe there is wisdom in White peoples’ racial insecurity, curiosity, humility and suspicion. Seeking this deeply personal and professional racial work, however, is (unfairly) a choice for White educators, and in my experience, more White educators than I would like to admit choose comfort and unquestioned complicity to the steep, and humbling work of dismantling racial supremacy in both themselves and their life’s work. Confronting racism and supremacy is not a choice for students or communities of Color, and it is also important to consider that for White educators to rely on educators of Color to want to, have the time and energy to, or be expected to teach White folks about race and racism, that is racial privilege, too (Gorski, 2017).

Continuing to build on the idea of possibilities in the work of dismantling white supremacy, Reynolds and Kendi’s (2020) young adult nonfiction text *Stamped: Racism, antiracism, and you*, and the subsequent *Stamped (for kids)* by Cherry-Paul (2021) - both remixes of Kendi’s (2016) National Book Award-winning *Stamped from the beginning* -
are strong examples of the potential of a next chapter in antiracism work. More specifically, Stamped: Racism, antiracism, and you is a text written for middle and high school readers that dissects the U.S.’s racial history and blends historically-rooted racism and contemporary-based antiracism in a call to action for young readers. On the back cover of the text, it reads in bold: “This is NOT a history book. This is a book about the here and now. A book to help us better understand why we are where we are. A book about race.” This is an example of new possibilities to talk and learn about race can involve young people directly. The implications for K-12 education are many.

**Critical Race Theory**

No study involving race in the twenty-first century, let alone a study revolving around race, education, and equity, would be complete without a review and application of critical race theory (CRT). In this section, I will provide an overview of CRT as a theoretical framework, a brief historical account of its origins as a movement and wave(s) of scholarship, and a more in-depth consideration of six of CRT’s tenets as they relate to this project.

CRT is a progressive and intellectual movement that is characterized by a race-conscious paradigm that explicitly challenges the operation of and impact of racialized power in the United States. CRT does not treat racial power “as rare and aberrational rather than as systemic and ingrained,” and it seeks to “re-examine” the ways in which race and racism have historically and contemporarily been acknowledged and addressed in the U.S. American consciousness and social and legal worlds (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiv). With a race-conscious and race-centered perspective, CRT scholarship strives to
understand and challenge how white supremacy was created, and is being sustained, in the United States through efforts to problematize and change hierarchical racialized power and the ongoing subordination of individuals and communities of Color. Ultimately, through a set of foundational and evolving contemporary critical analyses that collectively and critically center race, CRT is “a gasp of emancipatory hope” (West, 1995, p. xii).

Additionally, West (1995) asserted that CRT, which was “created primarily, though not exclusively, by progressive intellectuals of Color,” uncovers a lesser known racial past and reality towards actualizing a racial transformation, one that would “disclose the flagrant shortcomings of the treacherous present height of unrealized - though not unrealizable - possibilities for human freedom and equality” (p. xii). By addressing racism and its roots head-on, both historically and contemporarily, and through the perspectives and lived experiences and realities of scholars of Color, CRT interrogates and problematizes the operation of racism at all levels of society. Further, CRT scholarship can take many forms and approaches, and as Crenshaw et al. (1995) pointed out, there is no “canonical set of doctrines or methodologies to which we all [critical race theorists] subscribe” (p. xiii). Through a variety of arguments and analyses that are uniquely complex, contextualized, and nuanced in their own right, CRT scholarship takes a critical and purposeful approach to the interrogation of both the subtle and explicit effects and impacts of racialized power - all in efforts towards heightened racial consciousness and liberation (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

**Origins of Critical Race Theory**
Historically speaking, CRT was born from a long history of critical resistance to both unequal and unjust distribution of resources along racial, but also political, economic, and gendered lines in the United States (Taylor, 2016). Matsuda et al. (1993) stated, “Both the [CRT] movement and the theory reflected assertions of a community of values that were inherited from generations of radical teachers before us” (p. 3). A discussion on or about the foundational individuals in the emergence of CRT would not be complete without a nod to Derrick Bell, who Ladson-Billings (2013) shared is:

… the ‘Father of Critical Race Theory,’ perhaps because of his prolific writing on the topic, his instrumental role in educating many cohorts of law scholars who fostered the movement, and the principles by which he lived his life and his career.” (p. 38)

Similarly, Leonardo and Harris (2013) asserted that Bell was “the man who started a [CRT] movement,” and that his “ethical idealism and political pragmatism,” along with his “unyielding” and “principled” leadership paved the way for future critical race scholars (p. 471). Bell’s work was explicitly and critically race-conscious, as he unflinchingly addressed and critiqued the many lessons taught by the racist past and present of the U.S. Bell’s scholarship worked towards a deeper understanding of “racism’s true nature and the necessary sacrifices it would take to dismantle it” (Leonardo & Harris, 2013, p. 486). In his own words, Bell (2005) shared, “As I see it, critical race theory recognizes that revolutionizing a culture begins with the radical assessment of it” (p. 79). While the roots and foundational elements of CRT and the race-conscious philosophies behind it can be traced back to scholars of Color throughout U.S. history, Crenshaw et al. (1995) pointed to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and a dynamic
community of U.S. law scholars of Color, as a pivotal time in the emergence of CRT as a movement and set of scholarship.

Many scholars trace the origins of CRT back to an organized critique of critical legal studies (CLS) (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In the late 1970s, the CLS movement began to critically analyze the notions of neutrality and objectivity in law and legal reasoning which, CLS scholars argued, historically tended to “enforce, reflect, constitute, and legitimize the dominant social and power relations” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 12). Further, Brown and Jackson (2013) posited that while the CLS movement did in fact problematize the notion that power was operating to secure and reproduce inequities in our systems, institutions, and social structures, the CLS movement was led and predominantly populated by “White neo-Marxist, New Left, and counter-culturalist intellectuals” (p. 12), and thus CLS scholars simply “did not adequately address the struggles of people of Color, particularly blacks” (p. 13). More specifically, Crenshaw et al. (1995) contended that because CLS scholars did not develop or incorporate a specific critique of racial power in their analyses and approach, “their practices, politics and theories regarding race tended to be unsatisfying and sometimes indistinguishable from those of the dominant institutions they were otherwise contesting” (p. xxiii). Therefore, because CLS scholarship did not address racial power in its efforts to deconstruct both legal and political decisions that were connected to power inequities and disparate and harmful impacts on individuals and communities of Color, there was a need for a more racially-conscious, critical framework and movement that would explicitly address race and racism, critical theory, and the law.
In addition to the critique of CLS regarding race, many scholars of Color also took a critical racial lens to civil rights scholarship due to its lack of an explicit acknowledgement of race as a significant and *systemic* focus in racialized power and social hierarchy. More specifically, Crenshaw et al. (1995) argued that the transformative potential of the civil rights movement was compromised by the fact that racism was identified primarily as “the outright formal exclusion of people of Color,” and that race-consciousness in the rest of society and U.S. culture, including but not limited to schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces, went unaddressed and was “deemed to be racially and culturally neutral” (p. xvi). Furthermore, Delgado (1984) also pointed out that the legal scholars who made up the inner circle of leaders in civil rights scholarship, 26 in total, were all White males, and thus scholars of Color were excluded from the conversation itself. Furthermore, the lack of perspectives of people of Color, and the lack of racial criticality ultimately diluted the civil rights movement’s transformative potential to more deeply interrogate racial power and ideology in the U.S., and thus a more nuanced and explicit approach to racial and legal transformation, and one that included more people of Color and their perspectives, was necessary (Crenshaw et al, 1995).

Additionally, Brown and Jackson (2013) argued that both civil rights discourse and CLS came from the “perpetrator’s perspective” (Freeman, 1978), which centered racist individuals and actions such as racial segregation as *the* problem to be fixed, thus relieving the necessity and responsibility to (continue to) combat racism from the systemic level, such as the racially unequal distribution of jobs, wealth, and power, which was much harder to do since systems are not conceptualized as such objective
“perpetrators.” Further, attempting to make racism objective was not only problematic, but it also prioritized the perspective of the perpetrators over that of the victims (Brown & Jackson, 2013).

Moreover, the perpetrator’s perspective defined racism and racial discrimination as a result of “conscious discriminatory actions by individuals, not as a social phenomenon,” and thus “racial discrimination is the fault of a limited group of individuals; however, those who are not perpetrators are innocent and share no responsibility to ameliorate the problems caused by racism” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 15). Such an approach not only decentered the lived experiences and realities of the victims, in this case individuals and communities of Color who faced racially disparate educational opportunities, income, wealth, and affordable housing, but it also quietly maintained the status quo, to the perpetrator’s advantage and preference. CRT scholarship sought to name the operation of racism, center people of Color’s experiences and perspectives, and work towards more racial justice and transformation.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, many legal scholars of Color began to informally meet before and after law school conferences and conventions, which ultimately led to a more formalized coalition of scholars as primarily organized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Stephanie Phillips (Brown & Jackson, 2013). The first formal CRT meeting took place in the summer of 1989 in Madison, Wisconsin, and the participating 35 law professors of Color were all adept in CLS, many of them serving as the first individuals of Color hired at their academic institutions. Together, the scholars began to respond to “a call to synthesize a theory that, while grounded in critical theory, was responsive to the
realities of racial politics in America” (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p. xxvii). Their work involved the creation of a framework that would uncover the particularities and dynamics of race and racism in its many forms and manifestations, in both law and social life. Through that collaboration in the late 1980s, CRT was born with the goal of providing a useful, instructive, theoretical approach and vocabulary to address racial politics in an explicit and critical way. Further, Brown and Jackson (2013) asserted that the legal scholars of Color at those early meetings were not just looking for like-minded community, they were additionally “motivated by a desire to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of Color had been created and maintained in America” (p. 14), and they wanted to develop a framework to challenge and change it.

Therefore, although CRT was initially conceived in the realm of law and its role in producing and securing inequitable racial power and structures, CRT began to, and continues to, evolve as a movement and body of scholarship and scholars that uses an explicit and critical racial lens on the operation of racial power and racism and its impact on life in the U.S. Beginning in the 1990s, a set of early CRT essays began to truly formalize and legitimize the use of race as a theoretical focus, and those early essays “constituted a critical first step in identifying the operation of racial power within discursive traditions that have been widely accepted as neutral and a political” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxv). As CRT scholarship evolves and expands its reach, and as it continues to challenge historical and contemporary racial injustices in our courts and society, the implications of CRT, especially in the social sciences and education, are
incredible. In Crenshaw’s (2011) *Twenty years of critical race theory: Looking back to move forward*, she urged that CRT be understood as “dynamic rather than static” (p. 1261). More specifically:

> CRT is not so much an intellectual unit filled with natural stuff—thories, themes, practices, and the like—but one that is dynamically constituted by a series of contestations and convergences pertaining to the ways that racial power is understood and articulated in the post-civil rights era... I want to suggest that shifting the frame of CRT toward a dynamic rather than static reference would be a productive means by which we can link CRT’s past to the contemporary moment. (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1261)

Ultimately, CRT scholarship has many implications on the present moment and racial reality, and it can help frame a critical examination of the roles and impacts of race and U.S. racial ideology in not only the legal and political spheres as it was originally conceived, but also in evolving political, scientific, societal, social, and educational contexts. Additionally, CRT scholarship can be used as a theoretical and analytical framework in which race-conscious inquiries can draw on interdisciplinary contexts of educational and cultural studies, history, law, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and political science (Horsford, 2010).

In the context of this research, CRT has many implications with and in K-12 public education. In the following subsections, I highlight some of the major tenets of CRT that are of particular relevance to this research, each of which is explored individually.

**Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

every tenet we set out in this book, but many would agree on the following propositions” (p. 7). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) went on to elaborate on CRT’s tenets, while interchangeably using the terms tenet, theme, feature, and development. Recall also that Crenshaw et al. (1995) acknowledged the dynamic nature of CRT, the complexity, context, and nuance that characterize much CRT scholarship, and that CRT’s conception was born of a pointed critique of objectivity and formalism. With all of that said, I am hesitant to assume or cite any objective listing of the “tenets” of CRT, or the main principles or sets of belief that guide CRT-inspired theoretical and analytical inquiries. However, based on Delgado and Stefancic’s scholarship (2012), as well as the arguments set forth by Decuir and Dixon (2004), Horsford (2010), and Capper (2015), I work within and across six prominent tenets of CRT to guide, frame, and deepen this project in the realm of CRT, education, and racial equity in K-12.

Among the six tenets, each of which has their own subsection in this chapter and is described based on some of the initial and foundational literature in the field, are the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992), interest convergence (Bell, 1980), whiteness as property (Harris, 1995), counter-storytelling (Matsuda, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1995). Each tenet has a particular relevance to this research, and I explore each below.

**Permanence of Racism.** The first tenet of critical race theory, the permanence of racism, is based primarily in the scholarship of Derrick Bell and his concept of racial realism. Racial realism acknowledges the ordinary and indelible legacy and history, both past and present, of racism and racial discrimination in the U.S. Bell was an empiricist
and a realist, and he used legal analysis, storytelling, intellectual and political action, and historically steeped data and evidence of racial discrimination to chronicle the legacy and impacts of racism in the U.S., especially in law. Racial realism acknowledged the U.S.’s inconvenient racial legacy and truth in an effort towards both healing and a call for continued activism and action. Racial realism, Bell (1995a) asserted, is a legal and social mechanism that challenges racial injustice and also opens an avenue for Black people to “have their voice and outrage heard” (p. 302).

More specifically, part of Bell’s call for racial realism was grounded in problematizing the notion and ideology of racial equality, which was prominent in the civil rights movement and in episodic victories in the legal system, including Brown v. Board (1954), which I will discuss later with regard to interest convergence. For example, Bell’s (1992) foundational text Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism opened with an italicized provocation regarding racial equality - a provocation that he argued is easier to reject than it is to refute:

*Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard to accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance.* (p. 12)

Ultimately, racial realism was a way to cut to the chase in acknowledging a skewed racial reality, and it took a “hard eyed view of racism as it is” (Bell, 1995a, p. 308). By acknowledging racism’s role and roots in everyday life in the U.S., both historically and contemporarily, and by actively and conscientiously rejecting the illusion of or quest towards equality, Bell (1992) stood firm in his belief that “...we can only delegitimate it
[racism] if we can accurately pinpoint it. And racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people” (p. 148).

As previously cited, Bell’s work highlighted and verified the pattern of “short-lived” racial progress inevitably followed by predictable regress that reasserted White peoples’ interests and dominance. For example, Bell (1995a) pointed to the U.S. civil rights movement, and that while the “hated Jim Crow signs” were struck down, what went unaddressed were the more “contemporary Color barriers” that were “less visible but no less real or less oppressive” (p. 306) such as unequal social landscapes and educational opportunities. By citing and building upon the glaring racial inequalities as illustrated in the precedent of U.S. law and history, Bell’s (1995a) approach to racial realism explicitly challenged the “formalist model” that “existing power relations in the real world are by definition legitimate and must go unchallenged” (p. 307). In that challenge to existing power and racial realities in the U.S., Bell (1992) argued that “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (p. ix), and that racial equality, and also racial equality ideology in general, is “comforting to many whites, more illusory than real for blacks” (p. 13). Put differently but in the same vein, Bell (1995a) proclaimed that “Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal. By constantly aiming for a status that is unobtainable in a perilously racist America, black Americans face frustration and despair” (p. 302). Instead of frustration and despair born from denial, instead of striving for the ideal instead of wrestling with the real, Bell saw resistance, in both his scholarship and life, as a source of humanization and achievement.
Further, Bell’s racial realist approach challenged both legal precedent and the perceived objectivity and racial neutrality of law, by urging against idealism. Bell’s proclamation that racism is permanent was based on this realist and empiricist approach, which Bell acknowledged may not be easy, but was necessary. For example, Bell (1995a) argued that the philosophy of the racial realist rested in the “seldom acknowledged [racial] truths that we [Black people] continue to ignore at our own peril,” and by acknowledging the “permanence” of a racially subordinate status, Bell (1995a) believed one would be truly free “to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph” (p. 306).

The connections of racial realism to education, and in the context of this research, are many. However, the connection that is most obvious, most glaring, is that K-12 public education in the United States has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching and administrative force and has persistently underserved students of Color in terms of academic, social, and emotional outcomes, and that K-12 school-based racial equity work is both inconsistent and has not demonstrably created more equitable experiences or outcomes for students or educators of Color.

By engaging with and acknowledging this racial reality in education, and the racial realities of both educators and students of Color, and by exercising a critical suspicion of idealism and equality ideology, perhaps we can then move to thinking about new, more critical race-conscious responses, policies, and approaches towards more racial equity in K-12 public education. One need not look further than the present-day (2022) U.S. Department of Education (USDE) in its stated mission of “fostering
educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). What would a more realist, empiricist, critical, or “hard eyed view” (Bell, 1995a, p. 308) regarding equality and racism look like in regards to the USDE mission? Bell’s (1992) call to take part in the “unremitting struggle” (p. 200) towards a more racially equitable world in reality, in the here and now and “not in the sentimental caverns of the mind” (p. 198), is one that is carried on today in many ways. In Kendi’s (2019) *How to be an antiracist*, the text concludes with a nod to racial realism, and although Kendi does not name CRT nor racial realism as such, he wrestles with it, and with the idea of hope. Kendi (2019) wrote:

There is nothing I see in our world today, in our history, giving me hope that one day antiracists will win the fight, that one day the flag of antiracism will fly over a world of equity. What gives me hope is a simple truism. Once we lose hope, we are guaranteed to lose. But if we ignore the odds and fight to create an antiracist world, then we give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free. (p. 238)

Ultimately, as Bell (1992) reminded us, “the fight itself [against racism] has meaning and should give us hope for the future” (p. 308). This research acknowledges racial realism in education, and critically inquires about and invites the approximately 3 million majoritarian White educators in K-12 U.S. public education to that “fight,” to the ongoing struggle, and to square up.

**Interest Convergence.** In 1980, twenty-six years after the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) that unanimously declared the racial segregation of children in U.S. public schools unconstitutional, Derrick Bell published a powerful and critical piece in the Harvard Law Review and the theory of “interest convergence” was born. Interest convergence asserts that progress towards racial justice is only made when
it converges, or comes together and coincides with, the interests of White people (Bell, 1980). Further, Bell (1980) argued that while White people may “agree in the abstract” that Black U.S. citizens have the right to constitutional protection from racial discrimination, he asserted that few White U.S. citizens are willing to recognize and give up the “racism-granted privileges” that would need to be rectified in efforts towards more racial justice (p. 22).

For example, with *Brown v. Board* and the legal desegregation of schools, White U.S. citizens feared they would lose control over their (better funded and resourced) public schools and other facilities (Bell, 1980). Bell (2004) later termed this notion the “racial-sacrifice covenant” (p. 29), and he was not convinced that White U.S. citizens would sacrifice privileges granted from racism, as evidenced in history and U.S. precedent. For example, Bell (1980) elaborated on the example that many economically disadvantaged White citizens opposed social reform and/or welfare programs despite, ironically, having “employment, education, and social service needs that differ from those of poor blacks by a margin that, without a racial scorecard, is difficult to measure” (Bell, 1980, p. 23). Further, Delgado (1995) put it more bluntly when he stated that “Liberals and moderates lie awake at night, asking how far they can take this affirmative action thing without sacrificing innocent White males” (p. 1224). Without a converging interest for White people, Bell was not convinced they would support, let alone join in efforts towards more racial justice in the U.S. In his own words, Bell (1980) argued:

I contend that the decision in Brown… cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision's value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking
positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation. (p. 524)

Bell (1980) went on to detail several interest-converging examples of how the Brown v. Board decision actually benefited White U.S. citizens, as well as U.S. economic and political advancements that were under predominantly White control and authority.

First, during the 1950s, the U.S. was struggling internationally with Communist countries and wanted to “win the hearts and minds” of the rest of the world, and to improve the U.S.’s “prestige and leadership” that had been stained by the actuality of U.S. race relations and segregation. Brown v. Board and legal desegregation, Bell (1980) contended, would act as “a timely reassertion of the basic American principle that ‘all men are created equal’” (p. 524). Additionally, it is important to note that the “American principle” of equality and similar language like “liberty and justice for all” would, of course, stand alongside the blatant hypocrisy of U.S. racism as embodied particularly by its history of racial oppression, enslavement, and segregation.

Bell (1980) detailed another example of the interest convergence dilemma through Brown v. Board regarding the return of Black U.S. soldiers who had fought in World War II. These Black U.S. soldiers and patriots had fought for a country that had historically and currently oppressed them for centuries, and when these soldiers came back to the U.S., they faced discrimination and domestic terrorism in the South. Bell (1980) contended that such racial unrest and the ensuing anger of Black citizens illuminated a possibility for domestic racial anarchy. Brown v. Board could help quell that perceived anarchical spirit. Years later, Malcolm X (1965) alluded to the possibility
of domestic U.S. racial anarchy, a bit more directly and explicitly, in his autobiography when he said:

“It is a miracle that the American black people have remained a peaceful people, while catching all the centuries of hell that they have caught, here in white man's heaven! The miracle is at the white man's puppet negro ‘leaders’... have been able to hold the black masses quiet until now. (X & Haley, 1965, p. 247)"

Although taking a different tone and avenue towards racial justice, Bell (1980) was certainly not quiet about his critique of U.S. hypocrisy, and he urged, “it is not impossible to imagine that fear of the spread of such sentiment [racial unrest] influenced subsequent racial decisions made by the courts” (p. 23). After all, the racial reality of returning Black U.S. soldiers to a racially unwelcome and racially unequal home would certainly be problematic and in contrast to U.S. “principles.”

Finally, Bell (1980) also believed *Brown v. Board* was a decision based in interest convergence for White interests that saw the potential for the further industrialization of the South and more economic profits only *after* it ended the division and struggle that segregation posed. While there were surely some White people who supported *Brown v. Board* and racial reform due to moral and pragmatic reasons, Bell’s (1980) interest convergence argued that there were also White people guided by self-interest. Even though Bell’s objection and the notion of interest convergence “evoked outrage and accusations of cynicism” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 24), critical race theorists have since applied interest convergence to a variety of issues involving race, history, and education.

For example, more contemporary examples of interest convergence could include affirmative action, which in principle best serves the most impacted and marginalized
groups, but in practice best serves White women (Jackson, 2011b). Another example is educational policy (such as “No Child Left Behind” in 2003) that financially rewarded higher-achieving schools on standardized tests (which were also typically schools that served more White, affluent communities) while leaving other schools (that served more economically-disadvantaged communities of Color) behind (Kendi, 2016).

Ultimately, it is important to clarify that in efforts towards more racial justice, the discomfort of acknowledging and naming white racial privilege, interests, and supremacy is not always in White peoples’ interests, and therefore it can be lost and overlooked (Alemán & Alemán, 2010). Bell (1980) did not shy from criticality and criticism, especially in the legal realm, arguing that all those in the work of racial justice see critique as a tool to bring awareness, which is “always the first step toward overcoming still another barrier in the struggle for racial equality” (p. 533). Asking questions based in realism and empiricism may lead to more realistic considerations about the role of racism in U.S. history and U.S. public education, and racism must be named as real, durable, pervasive, and historically systemic before any authentic attempts to dismantle it.

Bell (1980) closed his foundational piece on interest convergence by urging those in the racial justice movement to continue to seek deeper awareness “of all the legal and political considerations that influenced those who wrote it,” and that there can always be more than just meets the eye (p. 533). This is certainly true in the realm of racial justice in education, not only in policy but in practice, too. This research critically inquires about and has implications on the role of interest convergence in White educators’ roles and impacts in school-based racial equity work.
**Whiteness as Property.** As another tenet and analytical construct of CRT, whiteness as property puts forward the idea that White people in the United States - and internationally - gain exclusive access to a historically documented plethora of “public and private privileges that materially and permanently guarantee basic subsistence, needs, and, therefore, survival” through their whiteness (Harris, 1995, p. 277). Further, through both the social and political construction of race, and through whiteness as a valuable and tangible form of legal and social property to accrue those “public and private privileges,” White people were (and are) able to develop and maintain power and domination, as rooted in both history and law.

In her foundational and provocative piece, *Whiteness as property*, Harris (1995) described whiteness as part of racial identity, of course, but more importantly as property that has been historically leveraged and legitimated by law for White people to remain atop the social, economic, and political systems in the U.S. Further, Harris (1995) argued that the traditional and more oft-used legal conception of property and property rights can be used to highlight how race has been a historically stubborn predictor of power and privilege throughout U.S. history, and that whiteness “although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated” (p. 277).

On a personal level, Harris (1995) opened *Whiteness as property* by detailing the life and times of her grandmother, a fair-skinned, straight-haired Black Mississippian who moved to Chicago in the 1930s where she was able to pass as White to work and survive. By passing as White, Harris’ grandmother was able to control “critical aspects of
one's [her own] life rather than being the object of others [White] domination” (p. 277).

Harris’s grandmother’s story, although Harris admitted her grandmother would have never stated it this way, illustrated what Harris (1995) referred to as the “valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste” (p. 277). To be White was to be valuable, and to have dominant legal rights. To be White was to be affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law (Harris, 1995).

More specifically, Harris’ (1995) conceptualization of the “entangled relationship” (p. 277) between race and property dates back to White people and their seizure and appropriation of Native American land and culture for their own interests and profit. Harris (1995) stated, “The conquest, removal, and extermination of Native American life and culture were ratified by conferring and acknowledging the property rights of Whites in Native American land” (p. 278). Only White people could possess and occupy land, and only White people had such property rights backed by laws that they themselves created, passed, enforced, and protected. This racial reality is even more chilling and troublesome when one acknowledges that U.S. K-12 public education does not accurately pinpoint the role and impact of racism and race in U.S. history, and that few students in the U.S. truly understand the horrors of genocide of Native Americans and African slavery (Takaki, 1993). Additionally, the fact that students learn of Manifest Destiny as the God-given right for U.S. expansion obscures the inconvenient recognition of White U.S. empire building at the expense of and on the back of seized Native land and forced Black labor.
Furthermore, Harris (1995) posited that African lives and labor that were seized and appropriated by White interests and control also legitimized and legalized whiteness as property. For example, the slave codes of the 1680s (as mentioned in chapter one) made it illegal for enslaved Black people to travel without permits, own property, assemble in some public spaces, own weapons, and to receive an education (Harris, 1995). Enslaved Black people could be legally sold, traded, inherited, or even posted as collateral through U.S. state-sanctioned slavery, and thus whiteness, and being White, became “the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings” (Harris, 1995, p. 279). Furthermore, the conceptualization of enslaved peoples as both property and persons could not be more contradictorily conceived than in the three-fifths compromise of the United States Constitutional Convention (1787), which would base representation in the U.S. House of Representatives by state population, counting enslaved Black people as three/fifths of a (free, White) person. In this case, enslaved Black people were used as leverage and pawns for political bargaining by a White-dominated government with its own converging political and economic interests. Yet another example of whiteness as property, historically, lies in the U.S. Naturalization Act of 1790 where being White was one of several requirements of citizenship (Harris, 1995).

The aforementioned White seizures of “property” from Native Americans and Africans can be conceived through Harris’s (1995) racialized concept of property, taken by violent U.S. force and backed by White-dominated systems of U.S. law. As Harris (1995) elaborated, “The state's official recognition both of a racial identity that subordinated blacks and of privileged rights and property based on race, elevated
whiteness from a passive attribute to an object of law” (p. 282). Whiteness, as property and power, was a “deployable resource” for privileged White people, that actively and legally excluded individuals and communities of Color, and whiteness remains a resource that has been (and still is) “used and enjoyed” to maintain white social, political, and institutional control (Harris, 1995).

With regard to whiteness as property, specifically in education and connected to this research, Donnor’s (2013) *Education as the property of Whites: African Americans’ continued quest for good schools* puts forth a powerful argument that White people, and the operation of whiteness specifically through choice, individualism, and colorblindness in education, have played a key role in controlling Black people’s access to quality education in the U.S. For example, Donnor (2013) examined the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2007 decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS) v. Seattle School District No. 1* which was brought on by a group of mostly White families who felt that the Seattle School District’s efforts to racially diversify the city’s best high schools was unfair and unconstitutional.

More specifically, to determine school placement for applying students and to ensure racial diversity in the student body, the Seattle School District used a series of three “tiebreakers” including one for sibling priority, one for geographic proximity, and one that considered a student’s race. Ultimately, the Court decided that a public school enacting a racial integration program was unconstitutional, and that families may be harmed by not being able to attend the school of their choice. More specifically regarding race, the Court determined that using race as a categorical variable in student school
placements would “effectively assure that race will always be relevant in American life” (PICS v. Seattle School District No. 1, 2007, Section II, p. 16, para. 1), which was counter to the more formalist, neutral, and colorblind equality ideology that U.S. legal precedent favored.

Donnor (2013) argued that the Court’s decision and positioning embodied “an attempt to transform society into an idyllic place where extant racial disparities and disadvantages are redefined as the byproduct of individual dysfunctional behavior, rather than the manifestation of historical inequities or structural discontinuities” (p. 200). In other words, by not acknowledging nor being responsive to the historical and empirical evidence of racially inequitable schools and educational opportunities for students of Color in U.S. public education, and instead by prioritizing the perceived needs, rights, choices, individualism, and colorblindness of majority White families and students, the Court’s decision cemented whiteness as property, and rights and privilege, and it sided with them.

As Donnor (2013) articulated, “the prioritizing of [White] personal choice within the context of education over racial equity recapitulates the educational and concomitant political economic status quo” (p. 202), and it simply reinforced historical, entrenched White racial advantages and the overall hierarchy of racial inequality. Additionally, and more recently, on August 13, 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice published a version of Justice News for immediate release, titled, “Justice Department finds Yale illegally discriminates against Asians and Whites in undergraduate admissions in violation of federal civil-rights laws.” In the statement, the Justice Department cited and expressed
agreement with a Frederick Douglass quote from 1890 that the “business of government is to hold its broad shield overall and to see that every American citizen is alike and equally protected in his civil and personal rights,” and the statement referenced Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the prohibiting of discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. First, the motives of and prioritization of such valued U.S. resources and efforts in a continued era of racial inequality, heightened racial consciousness and resistance through the dynamic racial justice movement for Black lives and justice, and continued white supremacy is worthy of a critical, race-conscious inquiry in and of itself.

Second, Donnor’s (2013) response to the Court’s decision with the majority White parents in *PICS v. Seattle School District No. 1* is very relevant in the context of the Justice Department’s statement to Yale University, as Donnor (2013) got to the heart of the matter:

> Not only does this validation [the Court siding with PICS] frame individual Whites’ cognitive and dispositional expectation of uninhibited access to quality learning environments as morally equivalent to Black people’s mistreatment and marginalization, historically and contemporaneously, but the Supreme Court’s affirmation of the mostly White organization’s claim of harm fortifies entrenched racial advantages and existing structural patterns of racial inequality. (p. 201)

Put differently, there is a need for racial criticality regarding the conceptualization of racial equivalence and protection under the law, as well as when considering how a neutral, objective, colorblind application of the law can be (and has been) used to cement and protect the enduring power of whiteness and racial privilege.

Further, the Justice Department’s evocation of the words of Black U.S. abolitionist Frederick Douglass is bold. What was left out in the *Justice News* (U.S.
Department of Justice, 2020) was what Douglass said immediately after the quoted statement on the role of government. The fuller quote follows, excerpted from Douglass’s (1890) highly compelling speech:

The business of government is to hold its broad shield over all and to see that every American citizen is alike and equally protected in his civil and personal rights. My confidence is strong and high in the nation as a whole. I believe in its justice and in its power. I believe that it means to keep its word with its colored citizens. (para. 14)

And so, the question truly is, has the U.S. kept its word, its promises of equality, freedom, liberty, and justice for all, to its citizens of Color? And would Douglass support the Supreme Court in its decision with PICS (Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 2007), and the Supreme Court in its decision in Washington v. Davis (1976) where racial intent was prioritized over racial impact (as discussed in chapter one)? Additionally, the Justice News’ reference to the Civil Rights Act does imply a moral equivalence and prioritization of the legal protection of White and Asian-American families being discriminated against due to their race while also entrenching and deepening the racial inequality our systems have always been built upon - systems and racial hierarchies with White people on top, and in some other relevant contexts including but not limited to education, wealth, and home ownership, Asian-Americans on top as well (Budiman et al., 2019).

However, in a historical sense, and in a realist and empiricist sense, such legal actions protecting White peoples’ interests are no accident, but merely contemporary products of the precedent set throughout United States and U.S. legal history. As West (1995) pointed out, white supremacy in law is “the critically most explosive issue in
American civilization” (p. xi), and because laws produce racial power, laws also “continue to reproduce the structures and practices of racial domination” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xxv).

That said, we must ask, how can K-12 U.S. public education work towards more racial equity when the highest court of U.S. law consistently shies away from opportunities to race-consciously address specific institutional and structural practices and policies that reproduce racially inequitable experiences and opportunities for students of Color? One could argue that PICS v. Seattle School District No. 1 is the Brown v. Board example of white interest convergence in the twenty-first century, a fresher example of “racial sacrifice covenant” (Bell, 2004, p. 29), highlighting that concerted efforts towards more racial equity for students of Color may conceivably require the surrendering of white racial privileges, or property (Harris, 1995), that have been historically secured and granted by racism. Clearly, in this case, the majority-White Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS) in Seattle were not going to surrender their benefits, privileges, and property, and whether knowingly or unknowingly, racial equity retained its elusiveness as a result. For this reason, and a plethora of others, it is my belief that more effective and productive racial equity work in K-12, with an intentional and critical look at the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators and administrators, is sorely needed.

Counter-storytelling. As previously discussed, CRT has roots in a critique of critical legal studies (CLS). Further, Matsuda’s (1995) *Critical race theory and critical legal studies: Contestation and coalition* - which was originally published in 1987 -
outlined an explicit challenge to the idea of a white, normative source of experience and perspective. Simply put, Matsuda (1995) argued that “Those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen” (p. 63). Further, Matsuda (1995) suggested the method of “looking to the bottom” for such lived experiences and perspectives, and thus the importance of “adopting the perspective of those who have seen and felt the falsity of the liberal promise [of law, justice, equality]” (p. 63) as central.

Further, Matsuda (1995) suggested that critical scholars seek a new epistemological source, that of the lived and real experiences, histories, cultures, and intellectual traditions of individuals and communities of Color - the “grassroots philosophers” (p. 63) - in the United States, those who can uniquely connect theory to lived experience, and in this case to racial oppression. Citing some of the same “Black prophetic leaders” that West (2014a) later did in his text *Black prophetic power*, Matsuda (1995) spoke of the influence of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King Jr., and also the importance of Black artists who used art as a tool of social change and resistance like Gwendolyn Brooks, John Coltrane, and Thelonius Monk. Harris (1995) argued that such scholars and artists of Color realized and engaged with and in their racial realities far before many White people and scholars “ever picked up a pen” (p. 64).

Therefore, the power of the counter-story lies in the importance of explicitly challenging the dominant narrative and/or perspective through race-conscious perspective-taking. Much of the foundational work regarding counter-stories is also
found in the scholarship of Richard Delgado. For example, Delgado (1989) argued that counter-stories and the voices of people of Color were necessary because of the unique and race-conscious social construction of one’s reality. Additionally, Delgado (1989) amplified the power of storytelling and its potential for both changing minds and building community, and asserted that counter-stories can serve as a means of resistance and self-preservation for people of Color as well.

With regard to counter-stories and their potential to change people’s minds, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) asked, “Have you ever had the experience of hearing one story and being completely convinced, then hearing an exactly opposite story, equally well told, and being left unsure of your convictions?” (p. 43). Delgado (1989) believed that “effective” counter-stories “must be or must appear to be noncoercive” as they can then invite the reader to suspend their judgement, and truly listen for their message (p. 2415). Ultimately, counter-stories serve as a “central, validating, data point” documenting the experiential knowledge of individuals of Color who have been negatively impacted by racism (Taylor, 2016, p. 7), and there is an essential value in the first-hand histories, or counter-stories, of individuals of Color who have a “competence” to speak on race and racism in ways that White people are not likely to know or understand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 10). As outlined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-stories also serve as an avenue to draw on the strengths of people of Color “as a strategy of survival and a means of resistance” (p. 138).

With Matsuda’s (1995) work setting the groundwork for the prioritization and legitimization of such counter-perspectives, counter-stories became a prominent tenet of
CRT. It is also important to note that counter-stories and the lived experiences of people of Color can of course be very different, as will be discussed in the ensuing section on another tenet of CRT, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995). Acknowledging such a multiplicity of identities in addition to racial identity, counter-stories can also help avoid the “dangers of a single story” by highlighting cultural plurality through the sharing of experiential knowledge, thus lessening the risk of critical misunderstanding (Adichie, 2009). Additionally, counter-stories can also play an important role as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to name and challenge racism, sexism, and classism in efforts towards more equity and social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2012).

In the context of this research which takes a critical lens to K-12 racial equity work and the role(s) and impact(s) of whiteness and of majoritarian White educators in the work, I center the voices and lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest (to be discussed in detail in chapter 3). Further, I believe that counter-stories can ultimately serve two very different purposes in this project. First, counter-stories can invite White people into new and unfamiliar worlds and racial realities; however, it is important to note that raising White people’s critical consciousness and awareness of race and racism neither is not, nor ever was, the original intention or purpose of counter-stories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Another complexity inherent in this research is the centering of Black and Black biracial educators’ perspectives on the topic of White educators, which seemingly resembles a break from the dominant (White) narrative and voice, but also simultaneously reinscribes the dominance of whiteness and White people through the topical centering of the dominant
White group. Additionally, as Delgado (1993) argued, the task of an “insider,” or a person of Color, to explain their racial reality to a White “outsider” (in a world in which racism is entrenched, as CRT posits) is both “difficult” and “formidable” (p. 662), and it may be risky and undesirable as well. For example, Delgado (1993) elaborated on the risk for the (counter)storyteller considering that “If...many of the dominant narratives incorporate a majoritarian perspective, the requirement that outsider storytellers adhere to these versions on penalty of being labeled untruthful comes perilously close to requiring them to reject their own culture” (p. 662). As a White male inquirer and writer, I must exercise care, caution, humility, and responsiveness throughout this learning process, and I expand upon that in detail in chapter three.

In the realm of counter-stories in U.S. K-12 public education, a predominantly White system, simply put, “without authentic voices of people of Color as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members, it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 58). Further, Guinier (2005) insisted “the experience of those who have been left out can help us to understand the ways in which we need to change our pedagogy, our curriculum… our relationships to the larger society and the communities [immediate to our institutions]” (p. 27). Ultimately, more educators of Color, more leaders of Color, principals, teachers, teacher-leaders, department chairs, school counselors, social workers, as well as more critically and race-conscious White educators and leaders, would both normalize and legitimize counter-stories as critical, necessary, and truly normative and representative perspectives in education.
Critique of Liberalism. Before getting too deep into the critique of liberalism as a tenet of CRT, it is important first to note that liberalism, in the context of CRT, refers to the seemingly normative and/or “traditional” and “conventional” values in a modern, capitalist democracy and legal system, including (but not limited to) equality, freedom, individual rights, and meritocracy. The critique of liberalism in a CRT frame is different from how “liberalism” is often used to describe current political or partisan affiliations such as liberal, moderate, and conservative (Zamudio et al., 2010).

With that said, the critique of liberalism is in a similar vein as the previously discussed critiques of CLS and civil rights discourse as not being critically race-conscious. In *Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in anti-discrimination law*, Crenshaw (1995) outlined a critique of liberalism as a formalistic, colorblind view that avoids race-consciousness and policies aimed at mitigating historically disparate racial outcomes. Further, Crenshaw (1995) argued against race-neutral positioning, and stated that very few CLS scholars “made more than a token effort to address racial domination specifically, and their work does not seem grounded in the reality of the racially oppressed” (p. 110). In a call for criticality and race-consciousness, Crenshaw (1995) urged the normalization of the distinct intellectual and legal thought informed by the lived experiences and conditions of Black people - or counter-stories, as previously discussed.

Additionally, Crenshaw (1995) also detailed the shift in civil rights discourse as it moved from equal treatment under the law, such as challenging the notion of separate but equal and school segregation, to the demand for equal *results*. When this shift towards
results and outcomes occurred, and when faced with empirical evidence and results that illustrated racial inequality, Crenshaw (1995) stated that a:

… belief in color-blindness and equal process, however, would make no sense at all in a society in which identifiable [racial] groups had actually been treated differently historically and in which the effects of this difference in treatment continued into the present. (p. 106)

In other words, since everyone does not (historically nor contemporarily) have an “equal” start, ideology and law should rely on a race-conscious understanding of racial outcomes to determine if racial discrimination is in fact operating. Further, Crenshaw (1995) challenged the reader to consider that if a colorblind, equal opportunity-based society did in fact exist in the U.S., even though the U.S. society was built from the racial subordination of people of Color, then how could such a society acknowledge and repair that racial damage and racial subordination if it never recognized it?

Ultimately, Crenshaw (1995) contended that the “myths” (p. 109) of liberal ideology in the forms of equality, meritocracy, and colorblindness, are in fact necessary to protect the “legitimacy of the dominant order” (p. 109), which makes redistributive reform as elusive as Harris’ (1995) conceptualization of the ghost of whiteness. If you don’t see it, it must not exist. And if racial intent matters above impact, as illustrated in chapter one with the Supreme Court case Washington v. Davis (1976), then racism is very hard to “prove” and thus even harder to repair.

From a historical lens, there are many contradictions in liberal ideology when it is confronted with U.S. history through a lens of racial realism and empiricism (Bell, 1995a). For example, individual political and property rights, both foundational concepts in both the Enlightenment and the overthrowing of the British monarchy that actually
created the United States of America, can be (and often are) considered important, honest, and true rights (Zamudio et al., 2010). However, such sentiment of one’s rights completely ignores the history and racial realities of Native Americans and Black people throughout the founding, expanding, and strengthening of the U.S. as a world power.

That said, CRT’s critique of liberalism asserts that liberalism, as a framework, cannot effectively address racial inequity given that many liberal foundations reside in what are considered by those with power to be “neutral principles” of constitutional law, such as colorblindness and equality, thus ignoring different racially defined contexts, histories, and lived realities of people and communities of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Zamudio et al., 2010). Despite the espoused U.S. principles of equality and justice for all, many historical and contemporary U.S. practices, including legal practices, have always been and remain unequal when considering disparate racial outcomes. CRT scholars’ critique of liberalism argues that if race is not explicitly addressed, and if racist ideology is not exposed and delegitimated, racially equal conditions and opportunities are mere principles, and as Bell (1995a) would argue, “unrealistic” ones at that (p. 302). By centering race and racism and challenging liberal ideology, CRT lays a bolder, more critical path towards more racial equity.

In the context of this research, I strive to amplify critical, race-conscious considerations regarding the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in school-based racial equity work as according to the voices and lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators. Moreover, I am drawn to Crenshaw’s (1995) discussion of the role of White people’s race-consciousness throughout U.S. history. While white racial
consciousness will be discussed in more depth in the ensuing section regarding critical white studies, Crenshaw (1995) shared a powerful point on how liberal ideology, if not confronted, rationalizes and protects racial inequality. Crenshaw (1995) stated:

Racism, combined with equal opportunity mythology, provides a rationalization for racial oppression, making it difficult for Whites to see the Black situation as illegitimate or unnecessary. If Whites believe that Blacks, because they are unambitious or inferior, get what they deserve, it becomes that much harder to convince Whites that something is wrong with the entire system. (p. 116)

There is an important connection to be made here about the reality of a predominantly White teacher and administrators force and system of public education that (re)produces racially disparate outcomes for students of Color. First, such liberal ideology as equal opportunity and colorblindness, as Crenshaw (1995) detailed, makes it difficult for White educators to see racial inequity as a problem, let alone to see themselves, the disproportionate racial majority of K-12 educators and administrators, as part of the solution. Taking a critical lens to not only the system of U.S. public education, but also to liberal educational ideology, and to the roles and impacts of the majoritarian White educators disproportionately over-staffing it, are part of the foundations upon which this research is built upon.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality, as coined and conceptually introduced to the scholarly world by CRT scholar Kimberle’ Crenshaw (1989; 1995), both challenged and broadened feminist and antiracist analysis. Building on the work of Black feminist scholars including (but not limited to) Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Bonnie Thorton, and even back to Harriet Tubman, Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality critiqued the way that courts, scholars, and even the antiracist and
feminist movements had not fully understood the intersection of Blackness and gender. Crenshaw (1995) attested that “intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity,” and that her intentional focus on the intersection of race and gender “only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 358). Through an intersectional paradigm, Crenshaw (1995) believed that feminism did not explicitly address racism (and had historically centered White women), and antiracism did not address patriarchy (and had historically centered Black men), and thus they both reproduced the historical and contemporary subordination of women of Color.

Further, intersectionality strives to “unveil” how and in what ways power and racial subordination has “clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others” (p. 374). Such categories, including (but not limited to) race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical/emotional/developmental ability, age, economic status, and religious/spiritual affiliation, have both significance and consequences, but are also sources of strength, community, and intellectual development (Crenshaw, 1995).

Additionally, Crenshaw (1989) argued that challenging all forms of discrimination does not mean categorizing them as singular or unrelated issues. Instead, truly understanding and addressing intersectional discriminatory practices and realities requires a more complex commitment to better understanding how they intersect to shape and affect people and systems impacted by marginalization and discrimination. Specifically, Crenshaw (1989) explored the multidimensionality of Black women’s
experiences, and intentionally viewed race and gender as related, and not singular things. An intersectional lens and approach ultimately challenges and complicates the more narrow and singular analysis of discrimination that focuses on race or gender. Instead, the intersectional lens looks at race and gender. The intersectional experience for Black women, Crenshaw (1989) argued, “is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” and is a much more “complex phenomenon” (p. 140).

Moreover, it is important to clarify and establish that intersectionality is a lens for better understanding social problems, discrimination, and inequality, and is not a lens to better understand one’s identity or experiences (Lynn, 2020a). Further, Lynn (2020a) contended that an intersectional lens forces us to complicate the problem of historical and contemporary social inequalities, and to do so through multiple and intersecting vantage points. As critical scholars, writers, and researchers continue to interrogate and problematize exclusion and social and structural categorization with regards to race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, ability/disability, and many other identity markers, there is a growing understanding and application of the notion of a multiplicity of identities, as well as the relationships between identity(ies) and historical and contemporary oppression (Parker, 2015). The theoretical construct of intersectionality asserts that if and when the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged are acknowledged and addressed collectively, then others, who may be singularly disadvantaged, will benefit through unified efforts that challenge the dominant view and narrative (Crenshaw, 1989).
Additionally, the multidimensionality of identities of historically marginalized groups and the conceptual understanding of intersectionality have continued to evolve beyond Crenshaw’s (1989, 1995) original focus on Black women. Intersectionality continues “to craft nuanced theories of identity and oppression, and to grapple with the messiness of subjectivity” (Nash, 2008, p. 4). By rejecting objectivity and positivist paradigms of knowledge and experience in regards to social constructs or categories (i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), the theoretical construct of intersectionality embraces subjective “messiness” and the complexity of how these constructs can and do intersect, and how such intersections can serve as sources and forces of privilege or oppression and marginalization. Ultimately, embracing intersectionality allows for a more critical examination of how subordination works with and in categories that have both meaning and consequences, as well as categories that have particular values attached to them. Further, Crenshaw (1995) argued that such values that are attached to categories can “foster and create” unequal social and power hierarchies if not critically interrogated through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 375).

In an interview with Time in 2020, Crenshaw was asked how she would explain what she means by intersectionality, which she introduced more than 30 years ago. Crenshaw (2020) replied:

These days, I start with what it’s not, because there has been distortion. It’s not identity politics on steroids. It is not a mechanism to turn white men into the new pariahs. It’s basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. (para. 3)

That said, the roots of intersectionality have remained the same, as Crenshaw (2020) attested, despite the nuanced reality of today’s times.
While the focal topic of this chapter and this research is on race, intersectionality is important to acknowledge and consider in this research as well as in this current social and educational context in 2022. For example, in the realm of this research, I acknowledge that the way this research likely reads may imply that I am generalizing all White educators’ roles and impacts in racial equity work, and that I am generalizing the perceptions of all Black and Black biracial educators through the interview data and shared experiences of the seven project participants. I assure you that is not my intention. I also acknowledge that such generalizations would ignore and conflate intra-group differences, which Crenshaw (1995) cautioned against and pointed to as a shortcoming of identity politics in general. Further, Crenshaw (1995) argued that “Ignoring differences within groups contribute to tension among groups” (p. 357), and thus the potential for harm in this research is both real and valid.

However, there are critical issues of power at play in K-12 public education that require a critical and racial examination in any and all efforts towards more educational and racial equity. Additionally, in order to interrupt and disrupt the dominance of a particular perspective, in the context of this research that being majoritarian White educators and administrators, such realities must be named, critically inquired about, and critiqued through a lens of intersectionality. I hope that in this research, I can explicitly speak against marginalization and racial inequity, and I hope to proceed with an awareness of intersectionality to “better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which of these differences will find expression”
(Crenshaw, 1995, p. 377) when it comes to racial equity work in a predominantly White staffed K-12 public school system.

Finally, intersectionality is also important to acknowledge and consider in this current social and political context in 2022, especially so with the ongoing movement for Black lives and justice, and Black Lives Matter, which was originally founded by three Black women, two of whom identify as queer. Black Lives Matter, Lynn (2020a) contended, is an iteration of Black feminist thought as well as an example of social justice work grounded in intersectionality. For example, the “What we believe” section on the Black Lives Matter website (2022) reads: “We are guided by the fact that all Black lives matter, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status, or location” (para. 14). In the quest for justice, liberation, and peace, Black Lives Matter documentation also states that: “We practice empathy. We engage comrades with the intent to learn about and connect with their contexts” (para. 19). Such an acknowledgment of individual context(s) amidst the collective struggle, and amidst efforts to imagine and create a world free of anti-Black racism, brings an inclusive, intersectional lens to the Black Lives Matter mission and movement. In the context of this research, which took place during a pivotal time in the movement for Black lives and justice, I strove to center learning with and from the project participants to better understand the complexities and different perspectives that they held on educational and racial injustice and where we go from here.

*Critical Race Theory and Education*
As stated earlier with regard to the origins of CRT, the early CRT essays of the 1990s actualized and legitimized the use of race as a theoretical focus, and amidst those essays was the oft-cited and foundational CRT educational publication of *Towards a critical race theory in education* by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) in 1995. It is interesting to note that the first meeting of the law scholars of Color that conceptualized CRT was in Madison in 1989, and the foundational work in CRT in education that followed it also came out of Madison just six years later in 1995. Specifically in education, several events in the 1980s led to the evolution of critical race theory in education, including the resegregation of schools post *Brown v. Board*, the widening and more consistently documented racial “achievement gap,” and the critique (and at times abandonment) of affirmative action (Taylor, 2016).

Further, Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) *Towards a critical race theory in education* sparked “exponential” growth of CRT in education including articles, conferences, classes and more (Taylor, 2016, p. 7), and according to Decuir and Dixson (2004), “Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) can be credited with introducing CRT to education” (p. 27). Lynn (2020b) agreed that Ladson-Billings and Tate were the CRT “trailblazers,” who along with Larry Parker and Danny Solórzano, paved the way for the “second wave” of CRT scholars in education including Lynn, Yosso, Dixson, Stovall, Berry, Jennings, Hughes, Delgado, and Villalpando.

In *Towards a critical race theory in education*, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that “despite the salience of race in U.S. society, as a topic of scholarly inquiry, it remains untheorized [in education],” and that a critical race theoretical perspective in
education, similar to CRT in legal scholarship, was thus necessary (p. 47). Tracing back the roots of critical race discourse in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) shared that their CRT scholarship owed an “intellectual debt” to scholars of the early twentieth century such as Carter Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom used race as a theoretical lens for addressing and better understanding social inequities, including in education (p. 50). More specifically, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) highlighted Woodson’s *Journal of negro history* (1916) and *The miseducation of the negro* (1933), and DuBois’ (1903) notion of the “double-consciousness” of Black Americans as part of the “prophetic foreshadowing of the centrality of race in U.S. society” (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 51).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) put forth three propositions for a CRT-based perspective at better understanding social inequity in both society and education. First, they acknowledged that race matters (West, 1993) and continues to be a significant issue in the U.S., which Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued was clearly documented in statistical and demographic data in education. Second, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended that society in the U.S. is based more on historically unequal property rights than it is on human rights. In an educational sense, unequal property distribution included but was not limited to unequal property taxes that fund unequally resourced schools, unequal “intellectual property” that manifested as the unequal quality and quantity of curricular materials and course offerings that could be classified as “rich (or enriched)” (such as a difference in elective offerings), and the unequal distribution of “real” property like “science labs, computers and other state-of-the-art technologies, appropriately
certified and prepared teachers” (p. 54). Finally, Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) third proposition for a CRT-based perspective at better understanding social inequity in both society and education was that the intersection of race and property provided an important analytical tool for better understanding inequity, which included citations to the work of Harris (1995) and the concept of whiteness as property, as previously discussed.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) closed their foundational publication on CRT in education with a pointed critique of multicultural education as it stood in the 1990s, which they likened to civil rights law that was “mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order” (p. 62). Further, critical race theory in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted, would “be built around the question of race first,” and it would both seek “justice for the oppressed” while simultaneously challenging the “hegemonic rule of the oppressor” (p. 62).

Throughout the 1990s and extending to today, CRT continued to evolve from legal scholarship to applications in the fields of education and cultural studies, literature, sociology, political science, history, and anthropology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT in education continued to grow and expand, and continues to, as it includes classroom pedagogy and praxis, community praxis, higher education policy and practice, education policy critique, critical race methodology, and gender, culture, and class intersections in education (Lynn, 2020a).

Additionally, there are two other foundational pieces of CRT scholarship in education that I would like to acknowledge that are especially relevant to this research. First, in Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications, Tate
argued that education and law shared a “paradigmatic kinship” that was historically and contemporarily steeped in a racial inferiority paradigm against individuals and communities of Color (p. 197). Further, a CRT-based approach in education could challenge the social frameworks and policies that produce and reproduce inequitable educational outcomes and experiences for individuals and communities of Color.

For example, citing Calmore (1992), Tate (1997) posited that CRT in education has the potential to challenge the normativity of white perspective and positionality as the standard(ized) measure of everything from academics and thought to behavior and expression. Further, Tate (1997) argued that CRT’s conceptual underpinnings, along with pragmatic classroom-level realities in education, are a “challenge for all scholars concerned with equity in education” (p. 233). Similar to several foundational CRT anthologies including those of Crenshaw et al. (1995), Lynn and Dixson (2013), and Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2016), Tate (1997) also highlighted the foundational scholarship of Bell, Delgado, and Crenshaw as examples of the transformative potential of CRT approaches in education. For example, whether building forward from Bell’s scholarship and his legal and intellectual critiques of the role of race and political and legal activism, Delgado’s impatience with dominant narratives and the hope and healing potential of counter-stories for transformational change, or Crenshaw’s invitation to problematize the breadth and depth of society’s ills through a monocausal lens and instead with a lens of intersectional inequality, CRT serves as an avenue of hope towards more equity in education.
Tate (1997) concluded *Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications* by outlining several relevant elements of CRT that have particular importance into a more systematic inquiry towards more equity in education. First, given the depth of racism in U.S. society, Tate (1997) asked how traditional aspects of the status quo, including standards, choice, and property interests, are tied to disparate racial outcomes for students of Color. Second, given CRT’s roots from interdisciplinary approaches (i.e. CLS, liberalism, law), Tate (1997) asked how education scholars can utilize a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Third, because of the depth of legal claims and legacies of racial neutrality, colorblindness, and purported objectivity, how can education scholars address these practices? Finally, Tate (1997) inquired, “What role should experiential knowledge of race, class, and gender play in educational discourse?” (p. 235). All of these questions, in many important ways, are relevant and related to this research.

The second foundational piece of CRT scholarship in education that I would like to acknowledge is Ladson-Billings’ (1998) *Just what is critical race theory and what’s it doing in a nice field like education?* In it, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested five areas, which she referred to as “exemplars,” where CRT can be applied to education to serve as a “powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of Color experience” (p. 18). The first three areas/exemplars addressed the school and classroom experiences (personal), and the fourth and fifth addressed systemic inequities (institutional). Ladson-Billings (1998) attested that if these five areas are collectively ignored and not analyzed from a critical race lens, the individual and institutional operation of racism in education
will both maintain and sustain the racial hierarchy with White people and perspectives consistently and persistently above people of Color and their perspectives.

More specifically regarding the five areas or “exemplars,” Ladson-Billings (1998) outlined the first area where CRT can be applied to education is *curriculum*, which if not interrogated with a critical race lens by practitioners and ideally learners and communities too, curriculum can serve as a “masterscript” designed to maintain and sustain white supremacy and its dominant culture, authority, and power (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). As referenced in chapter one, Delgado (1989) classified such dominant narratives that serve to mask oppression and a sense of responsibility or accountability from the oppressor as “stock stories” (p. 2416). In such “masterscripted” curriculum, for example, Rosa Parks is a “tired seamstress,” and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a sanitized “folk hero,” which ultimately disempowers the remarkable and radical contributions of the long-time activists, scholars, and calculated disruptors of racial and social injustice (Ladson-Billings 1998, p. 25).

Second is the idea of deficit-based *instruction*, which Ladson-Billings (1998) argued leads to “teachers engaged in a never-ending quest for ‘the right strategy or technique’ to deal with (read: control) ‘at-risk’ (read: Black) students” (p. 19). Such a colorblind and individual student-focused approach both isolates and identifies individual (read: student) failures as opposed to systemic (read: schooling) ones. Third, *assessment* through a critical race lens challenges traditional academic testing and achievement “science” and “intelligence.” Further, Ladson-Billings (1998) argued “[assessment] may tell us that students do not know what is on the test, but [it will] fail to tell us what
students actually know and are able to do” (p. 20). Ladson-Billings’ stance on standardized testing is no surprise, given the aforementioned reference in chapter one of her reconceptualization of educational gaps really more accurately understood as educational debts (Ladson-Billings, 2006a). All together, these first three areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment impact the classroom experiences and realities of millions and millions of students and teachers every day, and without a critical race lens, we risk dysconsciously maintaining and sustaining an unequal racial hierarchy and a racially inequitable system of K-12 public education in the U.S.

Regarding the more systemic inequities in education that would benefit from analysis through a critical race lens, Ladson-Billings (1998) pointed to inequitable school funding as the clearest and most direct form of inequity and racism in education. To connect this to a more contemporary example, a 2016 study found that school districts in the U.S. that predominantly serve students of Color received $23 billion less in funding than mostly White school districts, despite serving the same number of students (EdBuild, 2019). The EdBuild (2019) study was critical of both state and local funding methodology which included school district bordering and local property tax revenue and community wealth. Additionally, Bell (1980) put forth a stirring call to critically problematize the notion of local control in public education, which he called the most deeply rooted tradition in public education, and that local control “may result in the maintenance of a status quo that will preserve superior educational opportunities and facilities for Whites at the expense of Blacks” (p. 526).
In addition to school funding as a systemic issue in need of a CRT lens, Ladson-Billings (1998) also pointed to school desegregation, highlighting instances where desegregation has not improved Black student achievement, has increased Black suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates; and has increased opportunities for White students to take advantage of special magnet school programs, school choice, and free extended childcare through more offerings and enrichment programs. Simply put, there is an argument that school desegregation benefited White people more than it benefitted Black people, as discussed earlier in both chapter one and through Bell’s work on interest convergence (1980). Regardless of the directness or indirectness, consciousness or dysconsciousness, intent or impact; the combination of racist acts in education that land upon students of Color (through curriculum, instruction, assessment), and the systemic and structural racisms that land upon systems and communities (school funding and desegregation) have constructed a starkly inequitable, racial reality in the “nice field” of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Despite the bold path and potential of CRT in education as articulated by Ladson-Billings and Tate back in 1995, close to ten years later Decuir and Dixson (2004) argued that “particularly in the area of education, researchers have yet to utilize CRT to its fullest” (p. 27). More specifically, Decuir and Dixson (2004) asserted that educational researchers have mostly focused on counter-storytelling and the permanence of racism in the field of education, and less on the other tenets including interest convergence, whiteness as property, the critique of liberalism, and intersectionality, all of which, they argued, have much unmet potential in the field of education.
**Critical Race Pedagogy.** As another example of the potential of CRT in education specifically regarding curriculum, Lynn (1999) developed the concept of critical race pedagogy as a multidimensional, theoretical approach to education and argued that “race should be utilized as the primary unit of analysis in critical discussions of schooling in the United States” (p. 622). Critical race pedagogy acknowledges the endemic nature of racism in the U.S. - a former slave society - and the importance of cultural identity in a functioning democracy that “acknowledges and incorporates all of its citizenry” - including each person, community, race, and culture (Lynn, 1999, p. 622). Further, critical race pedagogy, all under the umbrella of active resistance against hegemony, acknowledges and makes space for the intersectionality of identities (Crenshaw, 1989; 1995), the need for liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000), the importance of culture, the value and role of inquiry, dialogue, and participation in the classroom, and the nature of practicing and encouraging self-affirmation with students (Lynn, 1999). When enacted authentically, critical race pedagogy has the potential to spark “critical explication of educational phenomena [regarding race],” and to “provide direction for educators who are concerned with issues of racial, ethnic, and gender inequality in the U.S. educational system” (Lynn, 1999, p. 622). When enacted authentically, critical race pedagogy could also transform our institutions, classrooms, and our students just as much as it would transform the scope and trajectory of education in the 21st century as we know it.

**Critical Race Praxis in Education.** Concluding this chapter’s review on CRT with critical race praxis in education (CRPE) is fitting given that CRPE prioritizes on-
the-ground action. Building on Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of praxis in education being built around reflection and action to transform one’s self and society, the idea of praxis, specifically its implications regarding action with and alongside one’s community, is an important defining feature of CRPE. David Stovall (2013b), who proposed the CRPE framework, is adamant that the work of educational justice is “real work with real consequences,” and that at the heart of the educational justice struggle is the responsibility to engage with and in communities, not in theory, but instead, on the ground (p. 300).

CRPE is an interdisciplinary approach born from educational, sociological, anthropological, legal, and public health scholarship that centers community alliances and the embracing of often complex, nuanced, and contextualized racial realities of underrepresented and under-resourced communities of Color (Stovall, 2013b). Proponents of CRPE advocate for a deeply relational and action-oriented framework with and in communities, and acknowledge the risks of community-based work that is “often messy, mistake-laden, fraught with contradictions, tempered and curtailed by life-events” (Stovall, 2013b, p. 292). However, with those risks comes the reward of an activist-oriented, engaged scholarship that takes on real-life issues in solidarity with communities, all towards more educational justice. Stovall (2013b) cited Yamamoto’s (1999) work on critical race praxis and community action for interracial justice as foundational to CRPE, as well as Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) critical race methodology in education, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter three. Ultimately, there are five tenets to CRPE.
The first tenet, commitment to on the ground work, prioritizes “tangible” and “explicit” actions with and in communities that are responsive and tailored to community, political, and economic realities, as opposed to more “abstract” theorizing (Stovall, 2013b, p. 294). The second tenet, social justice is an experienced phenomenon draws from Yamamoto (1999) and outlines that efforts towards more social justice must be tied to tangible goals that recognize challenging and conflicting racial realities within the community. Third, the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches, encourages the use of a variety of approaches, from public health and medicine to ethnic studies and urban planning, to address contextualized racial, social, political, and economic concerns of the community. Fourth, training others to move beyond the intellectual exercise of challenging dominant ideology, is a specific call to “develop the capacity of up-and-coming CRT scholars (e.g. graduate students, new faculty, etc.)” in community-based educational justice work (Stovall, 2013b, p. 294). Finally, the fifth tenet of CRPE is a commitment to self-care, which acknowledges the need for centered physical, mental, and spiritual well-being as a prerequisite to the larger work of achieving more racial justice in education.

In the context of this research, by centering the experiences and voices of seven Black and Black biracial educators and their work on the ground and towards more racial equity in education, I hope to move beyond the intellectual and into the tangible of what more effective and productive school-based racial equity work could look like in a more informed and responsive fashion. Early in Fightin’ the devil 24/7: Context, community, and critical race praxis in education, Stovall (2013b) clarified that “The purpose of this
chapter is to recruit and retain community-minded scholars to join the struggle to responsibly engage communities with the goal of educational justice” (p. 291). In the context of this research, by striving to responsibly engage with the project participants with a critical and explicit eye for the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators, including myself, I hope that this work may perhaps help recruit and retain more critically and racially conscious White educators committed to more racial equity in K-12 public education.

**Concluding Thoughts on CRT in Education.** It is clear that CRT provides a plethora of theoretical, conceptual, intellectual, and tangible provocations and inspirations towards achieving a more racially equitable educational system. As the world continues to evolve, as racial justice efforts continue to progress and regress as the story of history verifies, and as this contemporary racial justice movement in 2020-2022 continues to unfold, CRT’s foundational importance cannot be understated. Further, by publishing and republishing foundational thinking and new and exciting contributions to CRT, Taylor (2016) shared that good practitioners can be “recapture(d) and reinvigorate(d),” and that critical race theory can be a “lifeline… and a wellspring of tools for action” (p. 7) towards eradicating racial oppression in its many forms and settings, including in education. Additionally, Ladson-Billings (2013) was clear that in the commitment to fighting the “endemic racism that is extant in our schools… we must be careful to guard this movement [CRT] that is entering its ‘academic adolescence’” (p. 355). While there is much work to do, critical race scholars continue to be “inspired and
encouraged to continue to be explicit about the nature of race and racism in educational research and practice” (Lynn et al., 2002, p. 4).

When considering the future of CRT in education, and how it is situated within the racial history of the U.S. and of K-12 education in the U.S., Lynn (2020a) pointed to three considerations for the path ahead. First, CRT scholarship in education should continue to evolve from the problem-posing approach from the foundational work(s) of Freire (1970/2000) to a more problem-solving approach that pushes beyond the why, and additionally works to figure out steps to build forward towards repairs, responses, and solutions. Next, Lynn (2020a) argued for a more integrated CRT praxis and practice in both schools and communities. And third, Lynn (2020a) urged scholars and educators to go public in critical and race-conscious learning, teaching, and leading. Perhaps if more educators, especially majoritarian White educators, went public with CRT-inspired efforts and shifts, the likelihood of attaining more racial equity in education would be improved. Similarly, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) insisted that racial change “may come” with the normalization of the movement as sparked by critical race theory: “Perhaps if… new converts and fellow travelers [critical race thinkers and scholars] - persist, their work in time will come to seem not so strange or even radical, and change may come to American society, however slowly and painfully” (p. 150).

In conclusion, in wrestling with Bell’s (1990) racial realism, and the notion of the permanence of racism, perhaps majoritarian White educators can be invited to embrace the humanization that is the result of the struggle towards more racial justice. More specifically, Lynn (2020a) clarified that the humanization in the struggle towards more
racial justice can come in many forms, including the humility and humanity inherent in learning more, becoming better, and doing better. There is also humanization in the recognition of and solidarity with the humanity and lived experiences of others, who due to the entrenched racism in our society and its history have had to fight harder, fight more, and hold on to a sometimes fleeting hope for better. Fellow White educators, we have choices. In what we learn, and in who we strive to become.

Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical whiteness studies (CWS) is a theoretical framework that began developing in the late 1980s and early 1990s in a variety of contexts, including (but not limited to) legal studies, labor history, cultural and literary studies, feminist and gender theory, and education (Jupp et al., 2016). At its core, CWS was created and grew from historical and foundational work on race and racism from prominent Black writers including (but not limited to) Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin (Jupp et al., 2016). Additionally, CWS acknowledges that race is embedded in social identity, that whiteness in entangled in U.S. democracy and education, and the problematics of the one’s unquestioned socialization with racist structures and identities (Jupp, Berry & Lensmire, 2016). Further, CWS builds on the “growing realization that one cannot fully understand the existence of racism and racial inequality without paying close attention to the formation and maintenance of white racial identity,” and that the operation of whiteness is historically more than a privilege, and instead can be an opportunity to learn more about complex social
movements, ethnic identity, and social psychology (McDermott & Samson, 2005, p. 246).

While the first wave of CWS in education (late 1980s and early 1990s) focused on “race-evasive and privileged identities of White teachers,” less attention was paid to the “so what?”, or to the notion that merely describing a white supremacist ontology, one that has proved to be historically and empirically stable, would do little good for social justice change (Jupp et al., 2016). While there is some debate on the era of second and third wave CWS, Jupp et al. (2016) stated that the second wave CWS scholars (2004-2014) aimed to move beyond identifying and naming more binary white identities (i.e. White ally, racist, non-racist, antiracist) to problematizing and analyzing the complexities of “systemic racialized inequalities... racial identities, historical and social forces, and White respondents’ relationalities within hegemonic contexts” (Jupp et al., 2016, p. 1176). This research focuses on some elements of second wave CWS as I take a critical look at the racial educational inequality, historically and contemporarily, as well as the relationality of White educators in the predominantly White institution of K-12 public education in the U.S.

While Jupp et al. (2016) argued that the second wave CWS was between 2004-2014, Twine and Gallagher (2008) argued that there was a third wave of CWS that “sees whiteness as a multiplicity of identities that are historically grounded, class specific, politically manipulated and gendered social locations that inhabit local custom and national sentiments” (p. 6). This third wave of CWS included newer research methodologies including music and visual media such as photo interviews, racial
biographies, a more critical analyses of white identity formation among multiracial, Asian, Mexican, and other Latino/a/x individuals of non-European heritage, and more contemporary contexts (i.e. racial gentrification) (Twine & Gallagher, 2008). Building on the idea of contemporary contexts, this research and project is contextualized and situated in the Pacific Northwest in 2021-2022, and was authored from my hometown of Portland, Oregon, which has been called “the whitest big city in America” (Semuels, 2016, para. 5).

Additionally in regard to the three waves of CWS, in a piece titled Surfing the third wave of whiteness studies, Garner (2017) argued that for transformational practices to emerge from CWS work and lenses:

[CWS] will have to keep the need to critique power relationships foremost, and find spaces into which it can feed, generate discussion and be useful in some way to movements and action aimed at contesting racialized inequalities, from #blacklivesmatter to #whyismycurriculumwhite, through #rhodesmustfall to the Dakota pipeline protest, inter alia. (p. 1592)

Put differently, there must be a prioritization of usefulness towards movements and actions that build towards (in the case of this project) racial equity. The notion of usefulness is similar to that of pragmatism, which is discussed as a methodological choice in chapter three.

Furthermore, it should be noted that CWS and the intentionality of addressing whiteness certainly comes with risk(s) and critique(s). While CWS and CRT share an interdisciplinary approach by centering race, they differ in an important way in that CRT prioritizes the experiential knowledge and counter-stories of people of Color, while CWS - especially in the earlier waves - focuses on problematizing different aspects of white
racial identity. Moreover, as Frankenburg (1997) asked, “Why talk about whiteness, given the risk that by undertaking intellectual work on whiteness one might contribute to process use of re-centering rather than decentering it, as well as reifying the term and its ‘inhabitants’” (p. 1). Frankenburg’s (1997) cautionary statement resurfaces the important question, must whiteness and white supremacy be centered to be disrupted and dismantled? And if so, by whom and for whom? Similarly, it is also important to note that Professor Dr. Michael Eric Dyson noted a suspicion that “whiteness studies is a sneaky form of [White] narcissism,” and sociologist Share Elise attested that having White people investigate whiteness “seems somewhat naive” (as cited in Moon & Flores, 2000 p. 98).

Furthermore, perhaps a fourth wave of CWS is outlined in Matias and Boucher’s (2021) *From critical whiteness studies to a critical study of whiteness: restoring criticality in critical whiteness studies*. In their piece, Matias and Boucher (2021) contended that part of where some scholarship and critical inquiries into whiteness fall short is when it is not explicitly mentioned (let alone centered) that whiteness has an immense and profoundly harmful impact on people of Color. Leonardo (2013) called this phenomenon ‘Black whiteness studies,’ and argued that “people of Color bear the injury so that insofar as their voice is muted within a critical analysis of whiteness, whiteness studies replicates the very problem it seeks to solve” (p. 97).

Matias and Boucher (2021) offered three considerations towards achieving a “truer form of CWS,” one which one takes a “Black whiteness approach” (p. 3). First, research practices should avoid centering white epistemological standpoints. Second, the
counter-stories, lived experiences, and scholarship of critical scholars of Color should be centered. Third and more generally speaking, any work about whiteness and racism should be cautious, and should go beyond “white epiphanies,” such as work centered on “Emphasizing making whites ‘woke,’” which Matias and Boucher (2021) asserted further centers whiteness and further distances and ignores the lived experiences of people of Color (p. 3). In other words, if the experiences and voices of people of Color are missing in work seeking to take aim at whiteness, then whiteness is both “reified” and also “a practice of self-aggrandizing narcissism” (Matias and Boucher, 2021, p. 4).

That said, the aforementioned critiques of CWS are all important, complex points to consider in the realm of this research where there are certainly no simple answers or approaches. Moon and Flores (2000) highlighted the complexity and opportunity CWS affords when they wrote that CWS has been “both deeply criticized and heralded as a necessary next step in the struggle against racism, white supremacy, and white privilege within the United States.” Perhaps part of more deeply understanding CWS, including its risks, limits, achievements, and potential, lie in deeply exploring the concept and construct of whiteness.

**Whiteness**

As stated earlier in chapter one but worthy of an additional mention, whiteness is conceptualized in this review as a social power and ideology that normalizes and centers White peoples’ position, perspective, subjectivity, emotionality and affectivity (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Further, the separation of race and ideology, of White and whiteness, is not only important in this project, but also that separation is why Matias (2016)
intentionally capitalized White as a race, but not whiteness as a state of being, which is how I too have referenced each in this project.

More specifically, whiteness does not simply refer to an individual’s racial identity, but more refers to a state of being that is rooted in the “supposedly ‘commonsense’ beliefs that privilege White experiences, assumptions and interests” (Gillborn, 2008, p. 244). Put differently, whiteness is synonymous with historical dominance, “and it stands to reason that if somebody's dominant, somebody else is down” (Grover, 1997, p. 34). Further, Harris (1995) argued that yes, whiteness is an aspect of racial identity, “but it is much more; it remains a concept based on relations of power, a social construct predicated on white dominance” (p. 287). Additionally, Harris’ (1995) posited that whiteness has shielded society to the operation of systems of racial dominance by keeping the focus on the systemic racialized privilege of some, at the expense of “those perceived as a particularized few - the Others” (p. 290). This is especially interesting, and troubling, considering that people of Color compose the global majority, not minority. By operating in a way that is more elusive to those lacking a critical and/or racial consciousness regarding race and identity, whiteness sustains white supremacy.

Further underscoring these points, Castagno (2014) described whiteness as a functioning ideology, one that “maintains power and privilege by perpetuating and legitimating the status quo while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of neutrality, equality and compassion” (p. 5). Similarly to concepts in CRT, Castagno (2014) asserted that racial realism is subverted when centering and subscribing to the liberal notions of
meritocracy, equality, and even niceness, all of which Castagno (2014) referred to as the “ideological workhorses of whiteness” (p. 112). Ultimately, workhorses of liberalism such as meritocracy and niceness mask the historical and contemporary harms of systemic and structural white supremacy, including in education, as sustained through an unquestioned socialization to whiteness. Similarly, Warren and Talley (2017) explicitly wrote about “nice White ladies” and that becoming more aware of race and racism, as well as “understanding meritocracy, racial illiteracy, and managing racial stress” are useful for deepening one’s capacity to see and better understanding race and whiteness in efforts towards being a more culturally responsive educator (p. 165).

Castagno (2014) also argued that whiteness is maintained through colorblind and power-blind sameness ideology when White educators minimize or overlook differences among their students, and instead maximize the similarities between them, often “in nice ways - ways that avoided reference to power related aspects of their identities,” (p. 53). When this happens, whiteness is both concealed and protected, and remains hidden from sight and mind, along with race and the interconnected nature of power. To promote meritocracy, equality, and niceness in the name of equity, Castagno (2014) cautioned, is actually to fall into distracted deficit thinking, and into ignorance towards the brutal reality and insidiousness of racism and its harms to individuals and communities of Color. Ultimately, as whiteness is “an operating frame, not a physical manifestation,” (M. Lynn, personal communication, January 3, 2020), to disrupt the ongoing and harmful operation of whiteness, one must be aware of its power and presence, as well as the ways
in which White people (including myself) are either complicit in it (whiteness), or actively betraying it in our work and being.

**Whiteness in Education and Schooling.** In the context of schooling, whiteness is secured and made salient through “global north ontoepistemologies,” (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017, p. 1) or ways of knowing that are (and have historically been) grounded and centered around Eurocentric norms, the same norms that have left an indelible, historical mark on the world through “cultural and intellectual colonization” (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017, p. 2). Moreover, perspectives in school that are centered in global north positioning have (re)produced “a normalized White, male, middle-class, heterosexual version of childhood where minoritized children are viewed as deficit” (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, without an intentional awareness of both racial and cultural bias as well as positionality, historically underserved students (whether in terms of race, class, gender, language, or sexuality) can be ignored and overlooked due to the exclusionary effects of whiteness as the norm.

Pérez & Saavedra (2017) also challenged educators to be “critical ethnographers” (p. 19) of both themselves and their students, as well as inquirers about and deviators from the norm of whiteness. While White educators’ roles and impacts in racial equity work in education is discussed in more depth later in this review and project, it is important to note that “Ending whiteness can only begin when whites take responsibility in its identification and understand its ubiquity” (Matias & Allen, 2013, p. 303), which must come first through critical consciousness and self-awareness. Interrupting and disrupting whiteness is further complicated when considering the often implicit and
nuanced features of racism, including systemically, structurally, institutionally, and inter- and intra-personally, all of which secure the ongoing presence and power of whiteness.

Furthermore, because the dynconscious norm and normalization of whiteness further alienates and isolates people and communities of Color, harm is being done every day in classrooms and schools across the U.S. Miller’s (2015) critical ethnographic study of her own White children drew from the discursive theories of whiteness, which assert that “racism is perpetuated in subtle, symbolic, and discursive ways – through talk and everyday text” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 467). After collecting data from her children’s home, school, and community environments, Miller (2015) declared that they “oozed whiteness” (p. 143).

For example, White people were overrepresented in the “backdrop” of her children’s lives as “dominant, central, positive, normal” (Miller, 2015, p. 142) such as through shopping catalogues, books, her children’s Scholastic book order forms, school worksheets and reminders, field trip permission forms, PTO fundraisers, and school Social Studies curricula centering White perspectives and experiences. Specifically in school, Miller (2015) found that people of Color, as well as their contributions and lived experiences, were often tokenized and over-simplified, including (but not limited to) Sacagawea and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As referenced earlier, examples of such “masterscript” curriculum and historical depictions of historical leaders of Color, such as “sanitized” versions of radical justice activist-leaders like Rev. Dr. King, maintain and sustain white supremacy and its dominant culture, authority, and power (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 25).
Expanding on the idea of racial representation in schooling, according to the multicultural publishing statistics compiled in 2019 by the librarians at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 50% of children’s books depict White main characters, 27% depict animals/other as main characters, and just 10% depict Black main characters, 7% Asian Pacific Islander/Asian Pacific American, 5% Latino/a/x, and 1% American Indians/First Nations main characters (Huyck & Dahlen, 2019; School Library Journal, 2019). The lack of racial diversity in children's literature, in addition to a predominantly White teacher force, serve as strong examples of global-north, normative White racial representation (and dominance) in education. Additionally, it is very important to also note that schools across the U.S., under pressure from conservative parents and officials, have pulled more than a thousand book titles – most addressing racism and LGBTQ issues and most authored by non-White male authors – from U.S. classrooms and school libraries between August 2021 and April 2022 in a censorship effort that has been called “unparalleled in its frequency, intensity, and success” (Bernstein, 2022, para. 4). What does this mean for the future of racial equity work and learning in K-12 schools, and within the perpetually-shifting waves of progress and regress towards more justice in our schools and communities?

When viewed under the lens of racial schema theory, which asserts that membership within in-group or dominant society increases engagement in school and decreases depressive symptoms in students (Oyserman, 2008), the prevalence and presence of whiteness in education is a durable and harmful reality for students and
communities of Color. Miller’s (2015) critical ethnography, along with Huyck & Dahlen’s (2019) literary analysis work are sobering reminders that race and racism are learned, explicitly and implicitly, often in a nuanced variety of ways. The “oozing” of whiteness in school and literature dominated by white content, values, perspectives, and literary and historical characters (Miller, 2015, p. 143), as well as the prevalence of mostly White teachers and principals, are (White) elephants in the (class)room that must be addressed with a lens of criticality and humility.

Further, learning more about the role(s) of whiteness in education is especially urgent when considering that “children begin to notice [racial] differences and to classify and evaluate categories very early in life,” as early as three to five years old (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 336). This begs the question: when do students learn about race, identity, and inequality, and when should public education systematically address it? With a predominantly White teaching force, and acknowledging that “the vast majority of educators do not intentionally commit acts of racism does not negate the fact that anybody can contribute to institutional racism unless efforts are taken to avoid doing so” (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 335), antiracism requires explicit actions against racism, which begins with awareness and consciousness. If teachers are not critically conscious of what they are teaching and reinforcing, how will students learn to be critical of what they consume?

Additionally, Gillborn (2008) posited that the “hub of whiteness,” or the center, is secured by individuals (i.e. teachers) as well as agencies (i.e. educational system, the media), and that “actions and assumptions of different actors (from policy-makers to
media pundits and individual teachers) are all interconnected in mutually reinforcing and immensely powerful ways” (p. 244). Specifically regarding classroom interactions, acknowledging and inquiring about the dominant society and leadership is important in the pursuit of more racial educational equity. Giroux (1999, 2009, 2016) argued for a more progressive form of teaching and learning that requires teachers to critically examine how both structural and ideological aspects of the dominant society impact the interactions and behaviors of both teachers and students in the classroom. Such ongoing examination would require both acknowledgment and reflection on how teachers have been shaped by such factors such as biases and prejudice, that they may not or do not recognize, and could arguably lead to White teachers reshaping their White identity into one of active and intentional antiracism, as opposed to more of a casual complicity with whiteness, which actually strengthens whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018).

While not specifically referring to CWS or exclusively to White people, Kendi’s (2019) writing on antiracism as both an action and self-examination is relevant here. More specifically, Kendi (2019) asserted that being racist and antiracist “are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment” (p. 23). Being antiracist is not an identity, or a “permanent tattoo,” but instead “like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (Kendi, 2019, p. 23). I once heard a colleague once say that such “name-tags” like antiracist or ally, accomplice or co-conspirator, “expire at midnight” and require daily renewal by action. That said, being an antiracist is not a self-proclaimed title that individuals should
assign themselves or arrive at. Instead, being an antiracist is something we should consistently work towards, accepting that such work requires inevitable mess-ups and reflection, action, and reconciliation, as we strive to be better and do better. Certainly antiracism requires the attentive and intentional betrayal of whiteness.

That said, whether through sustained personal examination or self-critique, Miller and Tanner (2019) argued that instead of trying to “rectify” whiteness, White educators should aim “at the very least, to complicate the notion that antiracist teaching and critical whiteness pedagogy are smooth rides to liberation for white people” (p. 21). In other words, challenging racism, including the racism operating within one’s self (whether consciously or unconsciously), is a lifelong commitment to a process of self-critique, self-betterment, humility, and ongoing education.

Furthermore, Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, & Edwards (2011) argued that teaching about antiracism is even more important in majority White classrooms (with both teachers and students) than in more racially diverse settings, as White people must play an active and accountable role in dismantling racial privilege and power. After all, if left unexamined and uninterrogated, whiteness will maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies, at the expense of people and communities of Color (Picower, 2009).

In a larger context and scale, it is important to again acknowledge that at least one-sixth of the entire U.S. population can be found in a public school nearly every weekday, making U.S. public education the single largest governmental entity (Driver, 2018). The academic skills as well as the social and emotional skills and identities that form in early school experiences, taught and reinforced by an overwhelmingly White
teaching force, will undoubtedly influence all students’ lives and development. Put differently, “the attitudes students develop during minors’ first sustained exposure to governmental authority do not simply vanish on graduation day” (Driver, 2018, p. 15).

Public schools are cultural institutions that equip young learners with the skills needed to successfully inquire about, navigate, and contribute to the real world outside of schools - a world that is rapidly racially diversifying. After all, according to predictions by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students of Color are expected to make up 55% of the student population by 2027 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

What does it communicate to students of Color that so few educators, as well as other figures of authority including principals and even nationally elected officials, look like them, or share their cultural heritage and/or lived experiences? Why did Ta-Nehisi Coates, Black scholar and Nation Book Award-winning author, refer to his education at Howard University, the only truly comprehensive predominantly Black university in the United States, as the place he needed “to be normal - and even more, to see how broad the Black normal really is” (Coates, 2015, p. 142)? Sentiments like Coates’s indicate a failure in U.S. public education to be universally, racially inclusive and representative of more than majoritarian White educators, and more than whiteness-filtered knowledge, practices, leadership, pedagogy, and precedence.

To conclude the review on whiteness, given the historical trends of a persistently White teaching force in K-12 education in the U.S., for White educators concerned with improving outcomes and opportunities for students of Color, “examining and interrupting the whiteness of teaching remains one of the most vital tasks” (Picower, 2009, p. 213).
Personal and professional work around naming and interrupting whiteness in teaching is an important part of the type of work that schools committed to racial justice can work towards. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that racial inequity in education is not the sole responsibility of classroom teachers, although their role is of the utmost importance. Allen & Liou (2019) argued that also “school leaders must reject their transactional role in white supremacy and interrogate their own investment in whiteness” as part of racial equity work in education (p. 699). Such personal and professional racial equity work can be done by naming sources of oppression, developing and cultivating the political will to act, and taking up a critical pedagogical method and lens on curriculum. Ultimately, authentic transformation is contingent upon such acts.

**Racial Equity Work in Education**

As is evident from the literature review of critical race theory and critical whiteness studies, there are many layers of history, complexity, and opportunity when analyzing and centering race in the context of U.S. K-12 public education and racial equity. In this section of the literature review, I focus on the role of school-based racial equity work, its impact, challenges, and opportunities, and both considerations and expectations regarding the role(s) of White educators.

While previously stated in chapter one, it is worth reiterating that there is limited research that looks across the U.S. at the overall number or percentage of schools operationalizing sustained, critical, and systemic racial equity work in a systematic way (supported in policy and funding), as opposed to a localized or episodic way (i.e. buildings with equity-driven administrators or teacher-leaders or sporadic professional
development). The lack of research and data on school racial equity work makes research on it difficult, however, what follows is a review of some examples of school-based racial equity work, some of the complexities of White educator and administrator allyship, and a specific highlight of some studies on administrators leading school-based racial equity work.

In this review, I will not go into depth on classroom techniques and/or pedagogies that can potentially help to achieve more racially equitable outcomes including (but not limited to) restorative practices, culturally relevant-responsive-sustaining pedagogies, abolitionist teaching, anti-bias and antiracist teaching, critical race activism, and many more. This choice is an intentional one, as those approaches deserve dedicated research completely and deeply focused on them exclusively, and while those approaches can and do battle racial inequity in powerful and meaningful ways in schools, this research is based more on attempts at school-based racial equity work from a building-wide or district-wide lens, not just individual classrooms and pedagogy. Put differently, the research highlighted in this section will provide more information and considerations in the lens of making K-12 school-based racial equity work more of an expectation, not an exception, in the predominantly White system of K-12 public education in the U.S.

Furthermore, achieving more racially equitable outcomes in education is “One of the most vexing problems of our time” (Kezar et al., 2008, p. 125), and “we lack the clear understanding of organizational and institutional barriers that prevent implementation of these novel and important ideas to help create greater racial equity” (Kezar et al., 2008, p. 154). Perhaps racial equity work in schools is so challenging because of the persistent
operation of whiteness without the naming of whiteness, thus securing and strengthening supremacy and hegemony. Perhaps racial equity work in schools is so challenging because when racism is named and challenged, in any of its operating forms, White educators can resort to emotionality, fragility, and perhaps stances of colorblindness and racial innocence as detours towards more intentional and productive racial equity efforts. Perhaps a more formal commitment to and normalization of racial equity work in education could illuminate the institutional and systemic barriers that have plagued public education in the U.S. for centuries. Finally, perhaps committing to racial equity problems in practice could normalize the notion of collaboratively addressing them, as many schools do on a variety of issues every single day, through personal, systemic and institutional inquiry, data-collection and analysis, action, analysis, and reflection. Regardless of which way one looks at the role or impact of racial equity work in K-12 schooling, I hope this review helps in the transition from what is and what has been to what could be with regard to school-based racial equity work, as well as majoritarian White educators’ responsibility within and across it.

**School and District-Based Efforts**

In any school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity, it is important to consider that “given the racism plaguing our communities, schools, organizations, and systems, it is critical for schools and school systems to invest in professional learning aimed at raising consciousness and disrupting systems of racial oppression” (Ngounou & Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 60). Such educator professional learning and development is certainly a necessity, not a luxury, for schools committed to racial equity work. However difficult,
however many obstacles to overcome, beginning racial equity work by being “explicit about the salience of race,” and the discomfort of working against practices and policies that produce racially inequitable outcomes, is a prerequisite to transformative change (Matias & Liou, 2015, p. 602).

In some school districts, including some in the Pacific Northwest, a school district’s racial equity work can be led and facilitated by a school-based racial equity team of educators including but not limited to the building administrator(s), classroom educators, school counselor(s), educational assistants, and other staff members at an individual school. Further, Kezar et al. (2008) asserted that individual school-based equity teams should be intentionally chosen for members with specific knowledge, expertise, and skills, as well as access to quality resources and professional development.

In my personal and professional experiences with racial equity work in Oregon schools, similar to what Gorski (2019) argued in Avoiding racial equity detours (discussed in chapter one), it is the educators most committed to and vocal about racial equity that “are cast to the margins of institutional culture,” and left feeling isolated (p. 56). This was especially true for many of my more critical colleagues of Color over the years, many of whom have shared that racial equity work can be “exhausting,” and that they don’t want to be and are tired of perceived by their peers, colleagues, and administrators as “the angry Black or Brown person.” Additionally, many of my colleagues of Color have shared that they would appreciate White educators being the first to name racism in operation, to address microaggressions, to challenge deficit ideology, and to call-in other White educators to racial equity work. Unfortunately, it
does not seem to be that simple, though, as there are many factors and considerations to weigh when approaching, cultivating, and sustaining school-based racial equity work.

Among those important factors to consider are committed school leadership and support, the rejection of universal, “one size fits all” responses or solutions, seeking a grasp of topical knowledge from the published literature, and an institutional willingness, ideally legitimized through formal district/state/national supported policy, funding, and sustained action. An important starting point at the school level is the formation of a strong, interracial equity team.

**Interracial School-Based Racial Equity Teams and Facilitation.** Before we immerse in a review of the literature, it should be clearly stated that simply having interracial teams will not and does not guarantee productive outcomes or a lack of complications and complexity in school-based racial equity work. Meaningful, active participation across racial lines can result in a dialogic learning process, which is what develops “greater intellectual and relational capacity among participants across sociocultural and power differences” (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003, p. 125). Additionally, patterns of racism can manifest through the internalization of messages about racial superiority or inferiority if the team does not practice relentless vigilance towards productive and meaningful learning and action (DiAngelo & Flynn, 2010).

In the context of this project, it is also important to maintain a focus on the roles and impacts of majoritarian White participants. One useful lens is considering how pre-service teacher education takes up racial equity topics in education. In Amos’s (2010) qualitative study in the context of a pre-service teacher education class in multicultural
education, the insensitivity and hostility of the pushback of some White students on issues of race, ethnicity, and privilege led to students of Color in the class reporting feelings of frustration, despair, and fear. Amos’s (2010) study also highlighted the challenges that educators and leaders of Color continue to face in the form of challenges from majoritarian White students and institutions when the instructors attempted to address racial inequities in both personal and professional situations.

Similarly, Matias and Liou (2015) noted the complexity and challenges of being an instructor of Color for “the next generation of teachers, many of whom are White, monolingual, middle-class, Protestant, or Judeo-Christian, and encountering diversity for the first time” (p. 602). Further, “In a predominantly White classroom on a predominantly White campus, students of Color are forced to learn when to fight and when not to in order to avoid any unnecessary conflict and argument with White students” (Amos, 2010, p. 36). Such a choice of fight or flight can make students and educators of Color struggle with how to position themselves in front of White peers or students, while simultaneously striving to maintain their self-esteem, a constant burden of stress that one student of Color described as being “frustrated, scared, and most of all extremely tired” (Amos, 2010, p. 36). Intentional approaches and structures in regard to interracial learning and collaboration on issues of race and racism in education must be in place to avoid such an additional and disproportionate burden on students and educators of Color.

Additionally, there is transformative potential in the use of racial affinity spaces - or intentionally structured groups of people who share an aspect of racial identity. While there is research that supports the benefits of inter-racial dialogue and facilitation in racial
equity work in general (DiAngelo & Flynn, 2010; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Ngounou & Gutiérrez, 2019), there is also research that supports the strategic and responsive use of racial affinity spaces (Michael & Conger, 2009; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2013). The benefits of racial affinity spaces span broadly for both staff and students, and such affinity groups can help connect participants who share aspects of their identity “around affinity issues that concerned them and to provide a platform for their voices to be heard” (Keddie, 2019, p. 524). Furthermore, affinity spaces can help those facing marginalization “from an object to a subject agentive positioning” (Souto-Manning, 2013, p. 312). By having a space to connect with others that may be facing similar issues and racial realities, participants are further able to connect and collaboratively build community and address shared problems.

In regard to racial affinity groups for educators of Color, Pour-Khorshid (2017) argued that racial affinity spaces can be important for both healing and learning. More specifically, Pour-Khorshid (2017) found that racial affinity groups for educators of Color “collectively cultivated a critical, humanizing, and healing space for their [educators of Color] sustainability,” and that racial affinity groups helped participants navigate institutional racism by supporting the educators’ “personal, political, relational, and pedagogical growth” (p. 318). Picower and Kohli (2017) also attested to the importance of the collective resistance against institutional racism amongst educators of Color committed to racial justice, which included the utilization of critical racial affinity spaces for educators of Color and the cultivation of community and transformative praxis (Pizarro, 2016; Strong et al., 2017). More specifically, one example of critical affinity
work was detailed by Souto-Manning (2016) through the use of Freirean culture circles, which can serve as affinity spaces for those facing social injustice or marginalization to work with and alongside one another to address and work towards solving problems important in their own lives and stories.

Additionally, there are also benefits in racial affinity spaces for White participants in affinity spaces as well. For example, Michael and Conger (2009) argued that affinity groups can help White participants develop their own racial identity while simultaneously becoming more effective antiracist allies to peers and colleagues of Color, and that such spaces can provide a space for a deeper interrogation of white racial identity. Further, white affinity spaces can also be a place to acknowledge, process, and confront racial privilege, and an affinity space can help White people better understand the “need to know our [White] racial selves better before we can fully participate in antiracist work” (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 209). The use of white affinity spaces could also help avoid a major problem in many school and district-wide efforts towards racial equity, such as the assertion that whiteness and White learners and their racial consciousness are typically centered in whole staff professional learning opportunities at the expense of colleagues of Color (Thompson, 2004).

Finally, and also interesting to consider, in his autobiography (as authored by Alex Haley), Malcolm X (1965) was clear about what he thought the role of “sincere White people” in racial justice work was:

Where the really sincere white people have got to do their “proving” of themselves is not among the black victims, but out on the battle lines of where America’s racism really is - and that's in their own home communities; America’s
racism is among their own fellow whites. That’s where sincere whites who really mean to accomplish something have got to work. (p. 376)

What implications do X’s words have on racial equity work in education for majoritarian White educators, especially in predominantly White settings? What are the benefits and burdens of White people centering work with other White people in their own communities? Says whom, and for whom? And what would this look like in K-12 education?

In regard to affinity groups in general, however, it should also be noted that affinity spaces do not completely avoid the complexities of intra-group diversity and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995, 2020), including but not limited to exclusionary and “unhelpful… essentialisms and binaries” and even the othering that can take place with and in affinity spaces (Keddie, 2019, p. 522). Additionally, there is complexity and tension in regard to who can and should facilitate affinity groups and racial equity work more broadly, whose perspectives are included and centered, who benefits and who is burdened, and whose responsibility the work truly is. In the lens of this research, I aim to take a critical, suspicious, and ambitious look at the role of whiteness and majoritarian White educators and their roles and impacts in racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.

The Different Roles of Educators in School Racial Equity Work.

Before this review gets too deep into the theoretical and conceptual notion of White peoples’ roles in racial equity work, sometimes referred to as white allyship or accompliceship, we first must return to the fact that classroom teachers and principals in K-12 public education in the U.S. are disproportionately White, and thus school-based
efforts towards racial equity are likely strongly influenced, if not led, by White educators. While it is likely true that many educators perhaps reading this can think of other districts or schools they know that are doing critical racial equity work at their schools or in their classrooms, I believe our systems more broadly need a critical mass with a lens of criticality, and a firm, sustained commitment to this work.

White Allies. Often the term “White ally” arises in racial equity work as either a noun referring to a person, a verb referring to actions, or an aspect of one’s identity, whether self-proclaimed or otherwise. When opportunities for leadership and advocacy with racial equity work arise, the role of the White ally, according to Tatum (1994), “is to speak up against systems of oppression, and to challenge other Whites to do the same” (p. 474). Similarly, Patton and Bondi (2015) described White allies as “people who work for social justice from positions of dominance… [which requires] ongoing, requiring continual reflection, and perseverance… [to move] beyond words toward actions that disrupt oppressive structures and [toward] understanding one’s positionality in oppression” (p. 489). When white fragility (Accapaldi, 2007; Diangelo, 2012, 2018), white silence (Diangelo, 2012a, 2012b; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Sue, 2015), or white racial innocence (Ross, 1990a, 1990b; Orozco & Diaz, 2016; Orozco, 2019) take precedence and positioning over white allyship and the interruption of racial hegemony, racial equity work can be stalled, and thus stubborn and persistent racial inequities and harms persist at the expense of people and communities of Color.

Edwards (2006) asserted that there are three motivations for white allyship: self-interest (i.e. selfishness or even spiritual self-preservation), altruism (i.e. the belief that
people of Color need help or support, and that helping others is the right thing to do), and social justice. It is also important to note that the seeds of white saviorism can germinate in the realms of egocentrism and altruism as motivators for allyship, as highlighted by Matias and Liou (2015) when they wrote:

> Whether intentional or not, our White teacher candidates would refuse to see race but at the same time be motivated to save urban students of Color from a reality that is far different from the vantage point of someone whose racial status will never put them in doubt in social, educational, or professional situations. (p. 603)

Critical racial equity work must challenge and empower majoritarian White educators to recognize and reckon with notions of saviorism and prioritize the needs of their students of Color over their own with regard to racial equity. Conversely, Edwards (2006) argued that White allies motivated by the third motivation, social justice, a more sustainable and far-reaching passion and can have an understanding of the systemic nature of oppression while seeking to “amend” and “redefine” the operation of the system (p. 47). The motivation for social justice is more in line with some of the more recent literature on the notion of White accompliceship.

> More specifically, there is growing literature on the notion of differentiating between a White racial justice ally and an accomplice. In Moving from ally to accomplice: How far are you willing to go to disrupt racism in the workplace?, Harden and Harden-Moore (2019) asked, what does it mean to be an ally? And is allyship enough? Starting with an etymological look at the words, Harden and Harden-Moore (2019) noted that ally comes from the Latin word alligare, which means to bind to, while accomplice has etymological roots from Anglo-French accomplice, meaning “associate,” or “one associated with another especially in wrongdoing” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
Harden and Harden-Moore (2019) noted that “An ally is someone who supports those in which they have a common interest,” though “In terms of diversity, equity and inclusion, ally is an empty buzzword. It takes more than support to make a difference” (para. 6). Further, when conceptualizing the role of an accomplice, Harden and Harden-Moore (2019) argued that “Being an accomplice means being willing to act with and for oppressed peoples and accepting the potential fallout from doing so” (para. 7), and that accomplices “walk the talk and take the steps necessary to dismantle the power structure of white privilege and supremacy and create substantial and sustainable societal and institutional change that treats all persons with dignity and respect” (para. 8). This notion of walking the talk, and accepting the potential fallout of taking risks, is important to note.

Similarly, in Powell and Kelly’s (2017) *Accomplices in the academy in the age of Black lives matter*, they also argued that risk is at the center of the differences between an ally and an accomplice. More specifically, there is a difference between a White ally, or a “benevolent supporter,” and a White accomplice, or “risk-takers who aim to destabilize white supremacy in ourselves, families, schools, communities, and within the judicial system” (p. 43). Additionally, Clemens (2017) asserted that:

> An ally will mostly engage in activism by standing with an individual or group in a marginalized community. An accomplice will focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group - and such work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group. (para. 5)

This reminds me of an oft-cited notion that I have heard from colleagues and seen in the domain of educational social media discourse and debate (sometimes referred to as
#eduTwitter), but have struggled to find an actual author to cite: the notion that “allies take up space, accomplices take risks.”

Powell and Kelly (2017) also referenced the group Indigenous Action Media (2015), who aptly described the difference between ally and accomplice in a memorable way: Allies are “often carrying romantic notions of oppressed folks they wish to ‘help.’ These are the ally saviors who see victims and tokens instead of people” (p. 88). Accomplices, however, “seek ways to leverage resources and material support… to further liberation struggles. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for, and not be afraid to pick up a hammer” (p. 40). That said, what does picking up the hammer look like, and what does it look like in K-12 racial equity work? Similarly, Powell and Kelly (2017) asked, “What does it mean to take risks and initiative to challenge the status quo through our curriculum and pedagogy? How do we move our White students beyond fear and guilt, or worse, the role of benevolent savior?” (p. 52). These are important questions to ask of the White teaching majority in K-12 public education in the U.S. The collective influence and impact of approximately 3 million White educators across the country cannot be understated.

*Accomplices in the academy in the age of Black lives matter* closed with considerations for White scholar activists seeking to be accomplices. The authors, Powell and Kelly (2017), stated early in the piece that they are White women, and they also acknowledged that their collective work was based on discussions, experiences, and publications from people and scholars of Color. Among the ideas in that list of considerations for White teacher accomplices are to reflect on personal intentions,
motivations, and emotions while being aware of the possible operation of white saviorism. Also, to intentionally center the operation of oppression in both scholarship and teaching, which is a foundational element of Ladson-Billings’ (1995b, 1995c) original conception of culturally relevant teaching with intentionality towards increasing sociopolitical and/or critical consciousness.

Next, Powell and Kelly (2017) asserted that White accomplice teachers can “pay attention, listen, and tell about” (p. 59) the new and varied perspectives they are seeking, which seemingly is based in the notion of prioritizing counter-stories as outlined in CRT. Also, White accomplices can leverage and re-allocate resources that may not be available to communities resisting unjust systems including but not limited to accessing grant funding, office supplies, meeting space, research resources, and the like. Finally, Powell and Kelly (2017) urged for “direct action,” more specifically:

[White accomplices] Take action without waiting for community members of Color to invite you. Allies may wait on the sidelines until called to action for fear of overstepping. This puts the onus of organizing and teaching primarily on people of Color. Accomplices find ways to be accountable for their actions, looking to the experience of others who are already involved in the work. (pp. 60-61)

Clearly, there is no one approach or guarantor of success in racial equity work, and as referenced earlier but bears repeating, is Kendi’s (2019) notion that being racist and antiracist “are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment’’ (p. 23), and that being an antiracist requires ongoing and sustained self-awareness, self-criticism, and self-examination. These are important words to hold on to.
As also stated earlier, while this chapter is not intended to give teaching strategies for more racial equity, I will briefly note that in the classroom context and in the realm of effective teaching strategies, Sue et al. (2009) articulated several ideas that can lead to more productive work around race and racism in the classroom as led by White educators. Among those classroom techniques and conditions are when White teachers acknowledge their own and their students’ emotions and feelings, when White teachers self-disclose personal challenges and fears, when there are actively engaging classroom exchanges, and when there is a classroom climate of trust and risk-taking. While there is no one way to achieve or guarantee such classrooms and learning conditions, all of the aforementioned conditions require White teachers to take risks - not just to take up space (and at that, a disproportionate amount of space). Such risks include but are not limited to the fear of revealing individual and personal biases and prejudices in front of students, the fear of losing control of the classroom and/or situation, the lack of racial awareness and experience to navigate the dynamics of difficult dialogues, and the lack of knowledge and/or skills to properly facilitate or even intervene in challenging moments and exchanges (Sue et al., 2009). Sue et al. (2009) closed their piece with an acknowledgement that teachers are central to productive conversations about race and racism, that it is “disturbing” how few educators (in the 2009 study, full-time professors with strong influence and experience) are engaging in this racial equity work, and that it is “imperative” that education and training programs prepare future educators to navigate them (p. 1111).
In another take on the differentiation between White allies and accomplices, Osler (n.d.) outlined that there are multiple and varied opportunities for White people in the (ongoing) fight for more racial justice to assume the role of an actor, ally, or accomplice. For example, one can self-reflect on their actions including but not limited to their acts of advocacy, volunteering, and protest; one can consider where and how their money is spent, one can prioritize the work needed within predominantly White communities, one can actualize their role in electoral politics as well as the process of self-education and education of one’s family/children, and one can consider the role of the art(s) and one’s own home (Osler, n.d.). Ultimately, “For real change to occur,” Osler (n.d.) attested, “we must confront and challenge all people, policies, systems, etc., that maintain privileges and power for White people.” That said, for White people, that challenge begins with, and always circles back to, one’s self.

Similarly, in a call to (white) action, Spanierman and Smith (2017) stated that “if White people are going to engage in ally work, they must engage in self-reflexivity to avoid acting in paternalistic or other harmful ways” and that honest self-reflection and self-improvement, as well as humility and honest vulnerability, are of the utmost importance (p. 612). Ultimately, being a White ally, accomplice, antiracist, or whatever you want to call it is not a self-proclaimed status, but instead must be a process and pursuit fueled by a perpetual critical view of one’s own positionality, learning, and action(s).

Complexities of White Allyship. Additional and nuanced complexities arise when we consider the roles and responsibilities of White participation and responsibility
in school-based racial equity work. In the aptly titled *Advice to White allies: Insights from faculty of Color*, Boutte and Jackson (2014) shared their continual and persistent frustration(s) as Black female teaching faculty at a predominantly White institution. Boutte and Jackson (2014) highlighted that while they “appreciate and need” White allies’ voices, support, and actions to interrupt and disrupt racism, those White voices “should not dominate the dialogue or shadow those of people of Color” (p. 2). In their experience, Boutte and Jackson (2014) highlighted the frequent relapses and inconsistencies in White allies’ support, as opposed to more purposeful, consistent, and courageous efforts. Additionally, and just as importantly, White ally voices and actions, they argued, should be directly informed by the experiential knowledge and insights of individuals of Color whose voices may be, and often are, missing, absent, or silenced.

Boutte and Jackson’s (2014) emancipatory narrative not only detailed their positionalities and personal and professional charges towards racial equity, but it also outlined nine important, tangible pieces of advice and insight for those striving to be White allies or accomplices based on suggested understandings, knowledge, strategies, resources, and ideologies. Boutte and Jackson’s (2014) nine pieces of advice for White allies or accomplices included:

1. Silence on issues of racism is not an option.
2. Become familiar with academic literature on the topic.
3. Understand how racism is codified in policies and practices and how injustice is normalized in schools and universities.
4. Be prepared to lose “friends” as your status changes to an action-oriented ally.
5. Be willing to unlearn one’s own racism and begin creating positive definitions of whiteness.
6. White allies will have to let go some of their positions of privilege.
7. White allies will have to avoid upstaging the emphasis on people of Color.
8. White allies will need to make substantive changes in their courses and student placements.
9. Faculty of Color are not infallible.

As powerfully outlined, Boutte and Jackson’s (2014) nine bits of advice contain many important expectations and considerations for white allyship and accompliceship in racial equity work in education.

Similarly, Hip Hop educator and Teachers College Professor Dr. Christopher Emdin was asked the following question in a 2020 tweet from a White educator:

I'm a white ally dedicated to culturally relevant/reality pedagogy. Except can I ever be truly woke since I can never truly be a cultural insider with people of Color? What's your advice on navigating these facts? I am prepared for discomfort.

Emdin’s (2020) response, in a tweet of course, seems relevant and substantive in this discussion of White allies, especially as it highlighted the complexity of White people asking people of Color to teach them about race and racism. Emdin (2020) replied:

Thoughtful question. The challenge is the pursuit of “wokeness” - a term that is ambiguous & grossly overused. The work is in knowing & being yourself & using your privilege to meet the needs of youth being harmed in/by systems. Be you in the service of those other than you.

This Twitter thread highlighted an important complexity and reflexivity needed in racial justice work, especially for White educators. There truly is no one approach or one size fits all notion, but there can be wasted time and problems in pursuing a title like White ally, a status like “wokeness,” and a complex and layered request of a colleague of Color to educate you. Instead, as Emdin (2020) urged and very similar to earlier arguments and works cited, white allyship and racial justice work should not be about White people, it should be “in the service of those other than you,” which leads back to the important
question: does whiteness and supremacy need to be centered to be disrupted and dismantled? For whom and by whom? The implications here are many.

To further explore the complexity of White educators’ involvement and roles in racial equity work, and along the lines of Boutte and Jackson’s (2014) argument about the risks and harms of White peoples’ dominance in racial equity work, Ewuare Xola Osayande (n.d.) offered a critique of Tim Wise, a White antiracist speaker and author who frequents the national stage with published books and televised interviews. In *Word to the Wise: Unpacking the white privilege of Tim Wise* (Osayande, n.d.) highlighted three additional privileges White people working in antiracism maintain over people of Color, which are important to weigh and consider regarding the role(s) and impact(s) of White people in racial justice work. Among the white privileges are:

1. the ability to paraphrase and/or otherwise exploit the analysis of Black liberation struggle and have it received by others as though it were their own...
2. the ability to emotionally express their views about racism without having that expression dismissed as “angry” or “too emotional….”
3. being honored for their antiracist work as their Black activist counterparts and other activists of Color are denounced and derided. (Osayande, para. 9–11)

Osayande’s (n.d.) critical perspective begs the following questions: what is the responsibility of a White racial justice activist in both learning from and citing the experiential knowledge and lived experiences of people and communities of Color? What are the roles and impacts of white emotionality in the work of racial justice? And what are the implicit and explicit messages sent and received when White racial justice activists receive positive attention and acknowledgement for their efforts?

Additionally, Jacobs and Taylor (2012) outlined several motivations for more genuine, authentic White involvement in racial equity work, including (but not limited to)
White participants’ awareness of their unearned racial privilege and the power of structural racism, their understanding of both ethics and humility, their sense of accountability to less-privileged members of their community, and perhaps most importantly, their acknowledgement “that Whites created the conditions under which their activism is needed, and therefore, Whites are responsible for social change efforts” (p. 702). Further, Jacobs and Taylor (2012) found that:

… people of Color are not the only antiracism activists who fear ‘White takeover’ of mixed race organizations. These fears also can reside within antiracist Whites who make conscious efforts to avoid reproducing racism in their relationships with people of Color. (p. 703)

In other words, by intentionally avoiding “White takeover” of the organization, Jacobs and Taylor (2012) found that White participants’ action was slowed, even halted in some cases. So, what is the right amount of a White person’s involvement? And how can White people be cognizant and reflective enough to know when their involvement is enough? Or too much?

As referenced earlier, in a study on burnout in antiracism movements, Gorski and Erakat (2019) argued that White racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of Color in the United States. Burnout was defined using Maslach and Gomes’s (2006) definition as the situation where the stresses of activism become so much that “the initial ‘fire’ of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment... ‘burn out’, leaving behind the smoldering embers of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness” (p. 43). After interviewing 22 racial justice activists of Color in the U.S. with a combined 403 years of experience in activism (including Latino/a/x, African-American, Asian-American, Arab American, and Native American racial justice activists), Gorski and Erakat (2019) found
that 82% of the activists identified the behaviors and attitudes of White racial justice activists as a major source of their burnout. Considering that participants were not specifically asked about White activists, this was remarkable.

Gorski and Erakat (2019) identified five themes regarding the ways White activists contributed to the burnout of activists of Color, and all of which have serious implications for White racial justice advocates. Among the findings were that White racial justice activists were:

(a) harboring unevolved or racist views, (b) undermining or invalidating participants’ [of Color] racial justice work, (c) being unwilling to step up and take action when needed, (d) exhibiting white fragility, and (e) taking credit for participants’ racial justice work and ideas. (Gorski & Erakat, 2019, p. 793)

As Gorski and Erakat (2019) noted, perhaps future research - including this research and project here and now - could more intentionally and specifically address the roles, impacts, attitudes, and behaviors of White racial justice activists that contribute to movement effectiveness and sustainability rather than burnout.

Furthermore, in *The challenges of being a White ally*, Sue (2017) detailed the “Herculean struggle of convincing White Americans to become true allies to people of Color” (p. 707). Among the many challenges, Sue (2017) argued that White people must overcome the entrenched socialization practices and privilege that surround them, they must be critical of both cultural conditioning and convenience (with the perceived normativity of whiteness), and they must intentionally counteract whiteness and supremacy’s invisible nature. More specifically, Sue (2017) utilized a qualitative research study of four articles on White allyship in *The Counseling Psychologist* including Atkins et al. (2017); Smith et al. (2017), Spanierman et al. (2017); and Spanierman and Smith
(2017). After the analysis, Sue (2017) identified four themes and/or complexities regarding effective and productive White allyship that are similar to the aforementioned findings (Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Gorski & Erakat, 2019).

First, Sue (2017) argued that becoming a White ally presents internal and external challenges, is ongoing and lifelong work, and centers around developing trusting and authentic relationships with people and communities of Color. Second, White allies are raised, and not born. Put differently, learning about whiteness and white racial privilege, along with overcoming obstacles that discourage activism, requires strength and support from others. Third, White allies “walk the talk,” or “practice what they preach” with antiracism through tangible, sustained social action. Fourth and finally, white transformation is not just a cerebral or literary activity (Sue, 2017). In other words, one’s lived experience, especially including learning from experiences where White allies face (inevitable) pushback, isolation, threats, and personal and professional risks, are valuable experiences in the development of a developing an antiracist identity.

A common thread throughout much of the literature on White roles in racial justice is the idea of risk, personal and peer accountability, and sustainability and persistence. Such important work, and important considerations for White educators, brings the notion of personal agency to mind. Further, Lewis et. al (2007) defined agency as the “strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 18). To continue to develop White agency towards antiracism and racial justice, there is clearly lots of work to do. It would serve aspiring White allies and
accomplices well, including myself, to consistently ask themselves, “Who are you orchestrating yourself to be?” (Holland et al., 1998), and not to expect an immediate, nor permanent answer.

An additional role of White participants in efforts towards racial justice is to challenge and work with other White participants, while being mindful and strategic not to comfort others’ fragility, as such practice can lead towards complicity with whiteness and continued white supremacy (Applebaum, 2017). Building from Boler’s (1999) notion of a pedagogy of discomfort, Applebaum (2017) argued that White peers can offer each other “critical hope” (p. 200) towards an ethical, moral, transformative, and human learning experience - one that “offers a sort of assurance that discomfort will be an opportunity for profound learning about not only the other but also about oneself” (p. 872). Additionally, White educators and colleagues can think about the notion of calling in their White colleagues, as opposed to calling them out, as “calling out is an accusation, calling in is an invitation” (Bright & Gambrell, 2016, p. 224).

After all, as Wise (2019b) asserted, “We [White antiracists] cannot create allies or co-conspirators or whatever term you prefer by making people feel shitty about themselves or their identity” (para. 22). I would be remiss not to mention that the previously cited Wise (2019b) quote could in fact be a perfect example of Osayande’s (n.d.) critique of his and other White racial justice activists “ability to emotionally express... views about racism without having that expression dismissed as ‘angry’ or ‘too emotional’” (para. 9-11). There is certainly lots to consider, and that is also true in the realm of racial equity in K-12 for building administrators as well.
White Principals and School Administrators. Approximately 80% of all K-12 school administrators are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), and the quest for social and racial justice provides an additional challenge when considering that many school administrator preparation programs are “inadequately attuned to equity concerns,” and that standards and testing for administrative licensure “touch only the surface of cultural diversity, equity, and democracy” (Marshall, 2004, p. 3). Further, Marshall (2004) argued that educational administration credentialing merely prepares new leaders to be able to “do equity,” and that many eventual building leaders lack the “knowledge, materials, strategies, rationales, or skills to infuse their curriculum content (e.g. public relations, principalship, school finance, school law, interpersonal relations, and so forth) with issues related to poverty, language minority, special needs, gender, race, and sexuality” (p. 4). Earlier in the chapter, I argued the danger of students not having teachers who think critically and race-consciously, and here I’d like to shift that thought to the danger of not having a building administrator who equity work as something “to do.”

Furthermore, McMahon (2007) argued that White principals struggle with work around whiteness, as they typically lack a critical perspective, and view issues around racial equity as organizational issues (i.e. the need to hire more teachers of Color), and not institutional and systemic ones (i.e. racially disproportionate academic outcomes, access to higher level courses, racially disproportionate discipline issues, etc.). McMahon (2007) concluded that narrow and non-critical perspectives on racial and social justice from White building administrators, including seeing whiteness and racism at the
individual level, and preferring multiculturalism to antiracism, inflicted damage on students and communities of Color and bestowed (continued) privilege and casual comfort for White educators. Another factor at play regarding White administrators leading racial equity work is the White school administrators’ hope to project oneself and one’s school in a positive light, which only serves to maintain and mask racially inequitable hierarchies (McMahon, 2007; Ryan, 2003). Similarly, in Evans’ (2007) study of predominantly White educational leaders in school communities experiencing racial demographic change, she bluntly concluded:

Through deficit thinking, resistance, colorblindness claims, personal/professional/organizational ideological contradictions, and sometimes overt racist intent, school leaders’ and other school members’ implicit meanings about race legitimated the existing social structures and status quo… which ultimately marginalized the academic, social, and political interests of African American students. (p. 183)

Evans’ (2007) work is an important, powerful reminder that White school administrators need more than diversity training and inter-racial affiliations, but instead that they need more opportunities, structures, education, and expectations to address old ideologies and create new ideologies more in line with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Additionally, in Undermining racism and a whiteness ideology: White principals living a commitment to equitable and excellent schools, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) conducted a mixed study of qualitative and autoethnographic methods that highlighted six White principals who “made strides in raising student achievement, creating a climate of belonging for students, staff, and families, and increasing access to learning opportunities for marginalized students” (p. 1332). To qualify for the study, the highlighted administrators had to meet detailed criterion including:
Led a public school, possessed a belief that promoting social justice is a driving force behind what brought them to their leadership position, advocated, led, and kept at the center of their practice/vision issues of race, class, gender, language, disability, sexual orientation, and/or other historically marginalizing conditions, and had evidence to show their work has produced a more just school. (p. 1337)

Theoharis and Haddix (2011) collected data and vetted the school administrators through interviews, site visits, observations, a review of school documents and data, and field logs. In determining “evidence” regarding changing opportunities and more just outcomes for students facing marginalization, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) reviewed graduation rates, academic grades, test scores, attendance, advanced class offerings and enrollment, exclusionary discipline and discipline referrals, de-tracked courses, and inclusive special education and English language learning programs.

Ultimately, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) concluded that these six White principals all shared similar personal and professional work habits. More specifically, they all previously engaged in their own emotional and intellectual work about issues of race, they all regularly talked about and learned about race with their staff, they all infused race into their data-informed leadership, and they all intentionally connected with families and communities of Color. However, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) clarified that the previously cited work habits and ideas derived from the six principals were simply examples of some shared approaches to school-based racial equity work, and that the work habits were not meant to be copied or reproduced for guaranteed success. However, the work habits and ideas did help these six principals “navigate the racist terrain of schools to create safer, happier, and more rigorous places for students of Color and their families” (Theoharis and Haddix, 2011, p. 1348). While school-based efforts towards
racial equity must, of course, be contextually situated in regard to individual sites, students, and the culture(s) of the specific school community, perhaps the notion of common guidelines, or better yet *considerations*, are worthy of further exploration in efforts towards racial and social justice.

Building on the notion of considerations in efforts towards more racial and social justice, DiAngelo and Sensoy (2014) admitted that as social justice striving educators, “We won’t always make the right call in all moments for all students, but using the common guidelines as a starting point, we have found the following less-orthodox adaptations to be more constructive to our goals” (p. 8). Among DiAngelo and Sensoy’s (2014) common guidelines to challenge social inequality are embracing an intellectual humility, differentiating between opinion and informed knowledge, noticing one’s own defensive reactions as provocations for the pursuit of deeper knowledge, knowing one’s own positionality, and identifying one’s own learning edge and “pushing it” (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014, p. 8).

Additionally, it is also interesting to consider that in a review of the extant literature on social and intellectual movements (i.e. civil rights, feminism, critical theory, multiculturalism), Brooks et al. (2007) suggested that “social justice leaders strive for critique rather than conformity, compassion rather than competition, democracy rather than bureaucracy, polyphony rather than silencing, inclusion rather than exclusion, liberation rather than domination, and action for change rather than inaction to preserve inequity” (p. 400). Working with this description of social justice leaders, it is clear that there is no straight path to racial justice, and that if anything, the interrogation of
historical and contemporary power structures and the multiplicity of white identities and potential motivations, will lead to more questions than answers. However, in that pursuit, perhaps, is both progress and regress, always followed by reflection and action.

**Principals and School Administrators of Color.** In schools led by administrators of Color, which according to the U.S. Department of Education (2016) is approximately 20% of schools, racial equity work can have different considerations for White teachers. For example, Patton and Jordan (2017) highlighted the work of a Black female administrator leading racial equity work at a school with 75% Black students and a predominantly White teaching staff. After leading staff training on racial and social justice in which emotions ran high, in the staff feedback many White teachers called the training “a waste of time,” asserting that their Black colleagues were unnecessarily “pulling the race card” (Patton & Jordan, 2017, p. 82). Additionally, some White teachers said they felt “traumatized” by the experience, and that they wanted to opt out because “they liked things the way they were,” referring to the time before the staff explicitly worked on race (Patton & Jordan, 2017, p. 87). The Black administrator likened the experience of White educators’ pushback of racial equity work to a “modern-day lynching,” and she later told her staff: “We have now uncovered the truth, haven’t we? I encourage you to realize it. This experience was never really about you [White educators], it was about us [Black people]” (Patton & Jordan, 2017, pg. 88).

When considering the role of White teachers in school racial equity work, this again highlights the importance and complexity of (de)centering whiteness, and that to address the reality that racial equity certainly involves and implicates White teachers, it
also isn’t really about them. Such a juxtaposition provides an important, complex conceptualization of the approaches to and expected outcomes of racial equity work in a predominantly White U.S. K-12 public educational system.

**Why You Can’t Just “Do” Equity Work.** Finally, DiAngelo & Sensoy (2010b) argued that White teachers must wrestle with and move away from their North-American schooling-conditioned sense of more formulaic, solution-oriented approaches, especially in school-based racial and social justice work. In their (2010b) article “OK, I get it! Now tell me how to do it!”: Why we can’t just tell you how to do critical multicultural education, DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010b) asserted, we can’t just tell you how to do it because:

1) We want you to see complexity.
2) One size does not fit all.
3) We want you to understand the historical dimensions of inter-group relations.
4) We want you to be able to recognize patterns—within yourself and your society. (pp. 98-101)

There is no checklist, or to-do list, for educators, nor should there or will there ever be. If achieving more educational and racial equity were as simple as following instructions, would we not have already figured it out? If it were that easy, DiAngelo & Sensoy (2010b) argued:

We wouldn’t have to face the history of oppression in our nation states and how that history continues to impact us today, or think deeply, engage in uncomfortable self-reflection, strive for humility in the face of the unknown, admit to our prejudices and assumptions, and build relationships with people who are different from ourselves. (p. 102)

It is my hope that this literature review has sparked a combination of curiosity, provocation, engagement, hopefulness, and criticality. Selfishly, the drafting of this
review has served as an opportunity for me to continue to build background knowledge and literature, language, and space to grow and develop into a more equitable educator myself.

**Summary of the Research Literature and Application to the Study**

In this chapter I discussed the origins and impacts of critical race theory (CRT) which contends that race is a central, viable, and reliable way to analyze and address historical, social, and racial inequality. This study draws from CRT as an act of resistance against racial inequity and white supremacy by centering counter-stories and critical scholars of Color, and by addressing the pervasive impacts of ordinary and systemic racism(s) on people and communities of Color. This section reviewed six tenets of CRT, and this study specifically centers the CRT tenet of counter-stories, which urges the prioritization and legitimization of perspectives of people of Color that disrupt dominant (white majoritarian) narratives and discourses. More specifically, this research centers seven Black and Black biracial educators’ counter-stories and will utilize elements of critical race methodology in qualitative research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to explore K-12 racial equity work and the roles and impacts of whiteness and majoritarian White educators on the work.

In this chapter I also discussed critical whiteness studies (CWS) which focuses on the privileges that whiteness affords White people, including in the context of education. In the realm of this project, I use CWS approaches and concepts to problematize and analyze the complexities of how whiteness operates to secure racialized inequalities within hegemonic contexts. Additionally, in chapter five I use CWS concepts to analyze
White educators’ roles, relationships, and impacts on both racial equity work and on colleagues of Color.

Finally, this chapter also discussed racial equity work in education and important complexities and considerations including its nuanced impact, challenges, and opportunities. The final section also detailed the complex role and impact of White educators and the concept of allyship in racial equity work. Ultimately, it is my hope that a review of this chapter helps the reader see that there are certainly no answers, or quick tips and tricks, that will help achieve more racial equity in our predominantly White system of K-12 public education in the U.S., but instead that there are certainly important questions, considerations, and perspectives to explore the topic further. Ultimately, this research considers the roles and impacts of whiteness and of majoritarian White educators in K-12 school-based racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest with a critical suspicion and humility.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to critically explore K-12 racial equity work and the roles and impacts of whiteness and of predominantly White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. I employ two theoretical frameworks in this study, critical race theory and critical whiteness studies, to better understand the lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators involved in K-12 racial equity work, while also reflecting on and critically engaging with my own experiences as a White male educator. It is worth noting again that K-12 public education in the United States, post Brown v. Board of Education (1954), has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching force and has persistently underserved students of Color (academically, socially, emotionally). Another important premise in this research is the notion that that school-based racial equity work is both inconsistent and has not demonstrably created more equitable experiences or outcomes for students or educators of Color.

Furthermore, by purposefully focusing on the roles, responsibilities, and impacts of White educators on racial equity in U.S. K-12 education, I acknowledge the very real risk of centering whiteness, including my own voice, and thus further marginalizing educators, students, and communities of Color. However, I draw from Jackson (2011a), who argued that there is value in the ability to ask critical questions about the centering of dominant (read: White) groups in multicultural and equity-based research. More specifically, Jackson (2011a) asked:
How can we as researchers name whiteness without simultaneously re-centering it in hegemonic ways? How can we critically center whiteness within critical race and critical whiteness research methodologies in ways that productively dismantle white supremacy while simultaneously attending to the need for due attention to minority counter-stories and anti-majoritarian narratives of the oppressed? (p. 218)

These are powerful questions and considerations in the ongoing pursuit of more racial equity and the dismantling of white supremacy in education and beyond.

In the context of this research, I center seven Black and Black biracial educators’ experiences in K-12 racial equity work in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest while also purposefully and critically exploring their perceptions of their majoritarian White colleagues’ roles and impacts on efforts towards racial equity. Further, Jackson (2011a) also proposed that research designs that critically center whiteness in their effort to dismantle it must proceed with “extreme caution in considering the unintended consequences of such inquiry in practical terms” (p. 219). While there is, and will always be much more to unpack, learn, critique, and consider in such work, I continue to weigh this risk with humanity and humility first, centering the well-being, anonymity, and relationships with the seven project participants.

Additionally, I would like to again highlight several complexities of this research and its purposeful look at the roles and impacts of White educators in school based racial equity work, as originally outlined in chapter one. First, I am assuming that White educators have an impact on racial equity work, and that there are perhaps nameable White roles that can be researched. Second, there is very limited research that looks across the U.S. at the number or percentage of schools operationalizing sustained, critical and systemic racial equity work in a systematic way (i.e. supported in policy and
funding), as opposed to in a localized or episodic way (i.e. buildings with equity-driven administrators, teacher-leaders, or sporadic professional development). Perhaps this lack of a more universal understanding and engagement with educational racial equity work is due to the fact that it would be very challenging to measure without further propagating neoliberal agendas that mandate measurement and in turn find themselves in a “race to the top.”

Moreover, the lack of research and data on K-12 school racial equity work makes research on it admittedly difficult. However, what is attainable is the execution of a critical, humble, qualitative project that centers learning with and from the experiences of seven brilliant Black and Black biracial educators in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest as they relate to school-based racial equity work.

**Methodological Approach and Rationale for Qualitative Research**

With anthropological and sociological roots, qualitative research seeks to inquire and learn about people’s social, cultural, and contextual lives and beings, and the ways in which they have constructed meaning towards their unique understanding of their world. More specifically, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attributed to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The qualitative approach is a counter, and conceptually a critique, of positivist and “scientific” research that focuses more on the frequency, observation, and measurability of phenomena and the testing of theories. Conversely, qualitative research prizes a more discovery-oriented manner of engaging with phenomena that occurs naturally in its natural settings, times,
Ultimately, qualitative research values the individual’s understanding of and experiences
with and in the world, and is carried out by a human researcher or inquirer. Moreover, the
nature of qualitative research lies in the human researcher as the main instrument to
collect, interpret, and analyze data; with a focus on process, understanding, and meaning,
complete with inductive meaning-making, and a richly descriptive product of words and
pictures, and less so numbers and percentages (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

With qualitative research aiming to describe how people interpret their own unique experiences in the world, it is helpful to conceptualize qualitative research as an “umbrella term” over a wide variety of philosophies, methods, and interpretive approaches which are utilized to “describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). Additionally, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) asserted that qualitative researchers persist in challenging the distinction between the “real” and the reality that is socially and culturally constructed, and that underneath all assertions of knowledge and/or truth is an “understanding that all events and understandings are mediated and made real through interactional and material practices, through discourse, conversation… and tales from the field” (p. xiv). Put differently, phenomena is real, and evidence of it, in people’s lived experiences, words and expressions, are the data (Maxwell, 2013). That said, because the world is both real and socially constructed, all knowledge is social knowledge, and one’s individual perceptions of the world are a product of one’s unique and situated social experiences.
Additionally, Merriam & Tisdell (2016) argued that constructivism underlies all basic qualitative study. At the core of this belief is the notion that because reality is individually constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds, the qualitative researcher is most interested in “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). In other words, all qualitative research looks to better understand how meaning is constructed through how people make sense of their world and their lives. Constructivism, along with pragmatism, which is discussed later in this chapter, is where I find myself situated as a researcher, learner, and would-be-knower, both epistemologically and ontologically speaking.

Further, in a constructivist ontology, there are multiple and varied realities that exist for the multiple and varied people that hold different experiences and beliefs. In a constructivist epistemology, each unique individual holds their own perspective of what is “real” and “truth” based on their own conception of and perspective of reality. A constructivist methodology, which I employ elements of in this project, centers efforts to learn about the experiences and beliefs of individuals (in this case, seven Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest) as I hope to learn more about the roles and impacts of White folks like me in school-based racial equity work. The information learned certainly helped me, and potentially will help other White educators involved in school-based racial equity work as well, to form a better understanding of ways to continue to work and improve K-12 racial equity in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest and beyond.
An additional complexity, or some may argue opportunity, afforded to qualitative research is the “hybrid reality” that “[individual] experience, discourse, and self-understandings collide against larger cultural assumptions concerning race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and age” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. xvi). Therefore, a static, or certain “identity” is not feasible let alone measurable, and thus listening to and learning from the interacting and evolving individual takes precedence. The qualitative researcher’s primary goal is “to uncover and interpret these meanings” through a variety of uniquely, thoughtfully, and flexibly crafted qualitative research designs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). A universal understanding of, let alone even definition of qualitative research, Denzin & Lincoln (2018) argued, is not possible due to “Vastly different styles of thinking about a variety of different topics based on disciplinary, epistemological, gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, and national beliefs, boundaries, and ideologies” (p. xvii).

However, what does remain, Denzin & Lincoln (2017) asserted, is “the qualitative research tradition and its central place in a radical democratic project” (p. xviii), one evolving before our eyes and screens here in 2022.

It is also important to note that the process of qualitative research is flexible rather than fixed, but still maintains a systemic and interconnected structure (Maxwell, 2013). More specifically, Maxwell (2013) proposed an interactive model of qualitative research design with five components: (1) goals, (2) conceptual framework, (3) research questions, (4) methods, (5) validity. Maxwell (2013) argued that each of these components is connected through a “rubber band metaphor” (p. 5) with considerable flexibility and elasticity, but also a tension and the possibility of breaking if the pieces are not truly
interconnected, as well as informed by and sensitive to the other interacting components. And so, the goals of the study are connected to current knowledge and theory (conceptual framework), the research questions are connected to the goals, applicable methods, and models; and I strive to maintain a critical eye (and mirror) for validity and bias in the primary instrument of the research, which is me, the researcher, inquirer, and lead learner in this project.

**Research Goals**

Maxwell (2013) conceptualized research goals in a broader sense that included “motives, desires, and purposes - anything that leads you to do the study or that you want to accomplish by doing it [research]” (p. 23). This is a departure from, or perhaps an advancement from, the traditional nature of academic research goals being a specific objective. This is a departure I enthusiastically welcome. To me, this humanizes and humbles the human qualitative researcher, and provides a context for the individual behind the collection, interpretation, and sharing of data and “findings.” In other words, it gives a little of the why for the work. I believe this is especially important in the realm of research in the social sciences at this particular moment in time when the qualitative research community includes groups of international and multiethnic seekers and learners who are, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), “attempting to implement a critical interpretive approach that will help them (and others) make sense of the terrifying conditions that define daily life at the second decade of this new century” (p. xiii).

This research’s primary goal is to employ a lens of criticality to both K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, and to the role of whiteness and majoritarian White
educators (including me) in racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. In the midst of a daily life that is moving “into a politically charged and challenging future” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. xv), I believe that critical interpretive, qualitative inquiry, centered in humanistic and social justice commitments, is particularly why qualitative study is so potentially powerful in sharpening our “understandings of the larger human project” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. xviii). This critical qualitative work, I hope, will serve as a springboard, not the ceiling, to deeper racial understandings, engagements with complexities, and collective efforts towards more racial equity in schools. To this end, my goals are as follows.

**Personal Goals**

Maxwell (2013) described personal goals as things that motivate you, your curiosity, and things that are rooted in your preferences and desires to change or improve something. However, it is also true that not all personal goals are necessarily important for others. My personal goals for this research are based on my reflection that I could have done (so much) better as a middle school teacher on the west side of Chicago, and as a building administrator in Northeast Portland, in regard to my own racial consciousness and my own efforts and leadership towards more racial equity in K-12 education. My personal goal for this project is not to discover tips or tricks to being a more equitable (White) educator or leader. Instead, my personal goal for this project is to be better and do better with and alongside my colleagues and communities of Color, and to prioritize counter-stories in my own ongoing, lifelong, perpetually shifting learning and growth.
Practical Goals

Practical goals, Maxwell (2013) asserted, are “focused on accomplishing something - meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective” (p. 28). In terms of accomplishing something, this research shares important experiential information about the realities of K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings, and different perceptions on the roles and impacts of predominantly White educators in school-based racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. By centering the voices, lived experiences, and everyday realities of seven Black and Black biracial educators in K-12 school-based racial equity work, this research illuminates and perhaps affirms some of the intended impacts of White participation in the work, though more importantly, it has the potential to help illuminate the unintended impacts of White participation as well - such as contributing to the burnout of racial justice activists of Color (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Ultimately, I hope this research provides an avenue for meaningful inquiry, provocation, reflection, and ensuing action in the White majoritarian teacher force in K-12 public education, and especially in the Pacific Northwest. With that said, my practical goals are:

1. To take a critical look at examples of racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest (practice, processes, outcomes), while also being critical (but not generalizing) on the role of whiteness and White majoritarian teachers.

2. To prioritize and center the counter-stories and experiential knowledge of Black and Black biracial educators in K-12 school-based racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.

3. To conduct research in a way that offers something of value to the educator participants, and to conduct research in a way that disrupts the traditional power dynamic between White male researcher and participants of Color.
4. To position educators of Color as capable, responsible, individually unique, and dynamic intellectuals and change agents towards more improved and sustained racial equity work in education.

5. To position White educators as capable, responsible, individually unique, and accountable intellectuals and change agents towards more improved and sustained racial equity work in education.

6. To better understand how the actions and inactions of White educators in school-based racial equity work further the school’s racial equity work, hold it back, or maintain the status quo.

7. To improve school-based racial equity approaches as a means for more transformative and racially just schools and communities.

**Intellectual Goals**

Intellectual goals “are focused on understanding something, gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). While I am intentionally looking into the manifestation of systemic racism in K-12 public schooling and taking a critical lens to the roles and impacts of White educators’ actions and inactions in the Pacific Northwest, I am also keenly aware that racial educational inequities are a symptom of white supremacy - which Mills (1994) defined as the “European domination of the planet for the past several hundred years that has left us with the racialized distributions of economic, political and cultural power that we have today” (p. 108). In both conceptualizing and interrogating white supremacy as a mode, or system of domination that is currently operationalized in K-12 schooling in the U.S., it is blatantly clear that this research will not be able to address “why this is happening,” nor would any research, arguably.
However, what this research does have the possibility of doing, both intellectually and practically, is offering a deeper, more nuanced, and more critical understanding of K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings, and on the roles and impacts of White educators in the work, as grounded in the lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest. While there is some related research in the field, such as Boutte and Jackson’s (2014) *Advice to White allies: Insights from faculty of Color*, and some research that unintentionally found that there are harmful and unintended impacts of White participants on participants of Color in racial justice activism, such as Gorski and Erakat’s (2019) *Racism, whiteness, and burnout in antiracism movements: How white racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of Color in the United States*, I found that there was limited local, place-based, K-12 educational research that purposefully addresses this phenomena. Further, in Gorski and Erakat’s (2019) final page and closing, they urged future researchers to fill this gap in the literature:

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, we did not ask participants in this study specifically about White activists. A study in which interviews or other collected data focused solely on this issue likely would reveal additional, or more detailed, examples of how these conditions impact activists of Color. Future studies could focus more intently and purposefully on this issue… Another possible limitation is that we focused specifically on how White activists’ attitudes and behaviors informed burnout in activists of Color, potentially limiting the scope of what we could learn… Future research could expand beyond the activist burnout frame to look more closely at how some of the concerns raised in this study affect all activists of Color and racial justice movements more broadly. (p. 806)

This research works in the space of purposeful and critical inquiry regarding both K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings, and the roles and impacts of whiteness and White educators in the work. Additionally, this research does not focus
intentionally on burnout, but instead on K-12 racial equity work more broadly, as detailed through the shared experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest.

**Research Questions**

This study’s research questions are as follows:

1) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report their experiences with/in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

2) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report the participation, role(s), and impact(s) of White participants in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

**Pragmatically Speaking**

While I enjoy learning about and situating my own beliefs in the realm of paradigmatic debate(s), I will be honest in sharing that I feel the intellectualized debates on the nature of knowledge, reality, and would-be-knowers can be an academically exclusive conversation that leads less to growth in the social science methodologies and application with ensuing action(s), and more to individual philosophizing and theorizing. Morgan’s (2007, 2014) paradigmatic conceptualization of pragmatism is helpful to further develop my point and beliefs on the matter.

Further, Morgan (2007, 2014) makes a shift from the storied debate of positivism versus its philosophical rival in the metaphysical, to the more middle ground, pragmatic paradigm in social science research. In the pragmatic epistemological and methodological stance, the nature of experience, as well as knowledge construction and the sharing of it, are both helpful and useful. In the social sciences, such contextual and subjective knowledge (and action) is especially helpful and useful when it can be used to guide
behavior, establish warranted beliefs, and perhaps help produce more anticipated (and socially just) outcomes.

Morgan (2007, 2014), citing Dewey (1922/2008, 1925a/2008, 1925b/2008), argued that instead of debating the nature of truth and reality, Dewey and other pragmatists centered the contextual, emotional, and social life(s) “that focused on the experience of actions in the world, rather than the existence of either a world outside those experiences or experiences outside such a world” (p. 68). Instead of prioritizing the nature of reality and possibility of objective truth, “one of the defining features of pragmatism is an emphasis on “what difference it makes” to believe one thing versus another or to act one way rather than another (Morgan, 2007, p. 68). This isn’t to say that this version of pragmatism is void of a philosophy of knowledge, though it prioritizes a process-based quest for knowledge with inquiry as the focal and centered point of research. Within pragmatism, “Knowledge is not about an abstract relationship between the knower and the known; instead, there is an active process of inquiry that creates a continual back-and-forth movement between beliefs and actions” (Morgan, 2014, p. 1049, 2014). Morgan’s (2007, 2014) line of thinking and inquiring continues to speak to me - situating pragmatism as a paradigm that approaches inquiry into different social contexts as a form of social action, not a philosophical debate and abstraction, similar to Freire (1970/2000).

Another important consideration is Dewey’s concept of inquiry as a basis for research. Dewey’s inquiry model begins with the recognition of a problematic situation, considering the importance of defining the problem one way or another, developing a
possible response to the problem, evaluating potential actions and their ensuing consequences, and taking action towards the problematic situation (Dewey, 1922/2008, 1925a/2008, 1925b/2008; as cited in Morgan, 2017). I find myself both affirmed and provoked by this model of inquiry and action towards shared, constructed meanings and joint action. Additionally, and related, I want to briefly note the debate over the word research and inquiry. Dimitriadis (2016) argued that the objectification of knowledge, which is rooted in positivism, and the containment of knowledge in data is why the term research should be replaced with inquiry. Further, inquiry allows for open-endedness, contextual and culturally-situated knowledge, subjectivity, individuality, and uniqueness; all things relevant in qualitative inquiry. Replacing the term, and really the notion of research with inquiry may assist in “allowing us to get on with our work of thinking and acting differently in the world—our work of inquiry” (Dimitriadis, p. 145, 2016). This distinction, I believe, serves as a powerful reminder about the dynamic nature of social and cultural phenomena, and further opens the door to meaningful, humble, and curious qualitative inquiry. Such inquiry, when tied to criticality and the pursuit of more social justice, maintains the qualitative “struggle against neoliberal regimes of truth, science, and justice” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017, p. xiii).

Additionally, Morgan’s (2014) stance on pragmatism as a paradigm is focused less on debates about the nature of reality, and more on the nature of experience as socially constructed, and how experiences can determine useful knowledge that informs action, which can then guide behaviors to produce more anticipated outcomes (i.e. a more socially just world). This is not to say anything is generalizable, especially in the context
of this inquiry that centers the lived experiences of Black and Black biracial educators or explores the roles and impacts of White educators in racial equity work. However, this is to say that there could be elements of transferability, thus prioritizing what people can do with the knowledge they produce, as opposed to philosophical and abstract arguments about the feasibility and/or impossibility of generalization. Moreover, Morgan (2007) suggested “we always need to ask how much of our existing knowledge might be usable in a new set of circumstances, as well as what our warrant is for making any such claims” (p. 72). In my efforts towards a practical and pragmatic approach towards understanding more avenues and paths forward towards more racial equity work in education, my essential emphasis is on the actions and inactions of majoritarian White educators in racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest (the “lines of action”), the beliefs that lie beneath those behaviors according to Black and Black biracial colleagues (the “warranted assertions”), and the consequences that are likely to follow from different behaviors (“workability”) (Morgan, 2007, p. 67).

In this inquiry, the pragmatic emphasis is on whether any new knowledge produced can or will be useful, and whether it can be used to potentially influence White educators’ behavior towards more informed, responsive, and sustained efforts towards more racial equity in education. This is different from asserting the generalizability of White educators or Black or Black biracial experiences in education or the nature of reality and truth. Further, Morgan (2007) argued that research in the social sciences should be judged by the range of actions that it makes possible, and because I agree, I strive to ensure this inquiry and learning has a point and product, and I strive to ensure
that the project participants feel it does as well. I believe this is practical, pragmatic, and possible with the right approach(es) and methodology(ies).

**Conceptual Framework**

Maxwell (2013) argued that conceptual frameworks should be constructed, not found, and throughout their construction, researchers/inquirers should seek out, consider, and critique the past and current literature and theories, beliefs, and assumptions that will support and inform their inquiry. Furthermore, Maxwell (2013) outlined four sources to construct a conceptual framework that informed this inquiry and its design.

First, the researcher/inquirer’s experiential knowledge should be embraced and clarified as opposed to avoided or eliminated (Maxwell, 2013). In qualitative research, with the researcher as the primary instrument of research/inquiry, researcher positionality and subjectivity is unavoidable and simultaneously invaluable. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) put it well:

> My [researcher’s] subjectivity is the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do as a researcher. Seen as virtuous, subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than exorcise. (p. 104; as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p. 45)

In a later section, I outline and detail my unique positionality, and therefore bias, in this research and the ensuing implications it has on the project and findings/interpretations.

The second element in constructing a conceptual framework, as identified by Maxwell (2013), is the utilization of existing theory and research. In this project, I explore the durable reality of racial inequity in K-12 public education, its historically and predominantly White teaching force, and the lack of demonstrably effective school-based
racial equity work through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) and critical white studies (CWS), as discussed in chapter two.

The third and fourth elements of Maxwell’s (2013) four sources to construct a conceptual framework, after the utilization of existing frameworks, are pilot and exploratory studies and thought experiments (Maxwell, 2013). In my past and current work in K-12 public education, my exploratory work and thought experiments are and have been daily exercises. My experiences include those as a middle school classroom teacher in Chicago (Illinois), a school administrator who facilitated racial equity work in Portland (Oregon), and a district employee in the office of teaching and learning in Beaverton (Oregon), which are outlined later in this chapter as elements and ingredients of my positionality and lens.

Additionally, I also acknowledge that the conceptual framework that I have constructed, which includes the lens through which I look at research/inquiry, has simultaneously and frequently obscured, illuminated, and shaped the “findings” of this work. And that’s ok, because this is just one study, and I am but one, biased, culturally and contextually situated individual. With myself as the primary research instrument (Maxwell, 2013), I acknowledge that the tool is human - and fallible - and that the results of this inquiry will not be generalizable, which is not necessarily a limitation because generalized findings were never an intention of this project.

**Researcher as Instrument**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of the research, data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Historically
speaking, I find this interesting, given that traditionally the researcher’s background and positionality was “treated as bias, something whose influence needs to be eliminated from the design, rather than a valuable component of it” (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 44-45). With the researcher being the instrument of research, it is both necessary and important to explicitly describe the instrument’s strengths and limitations.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that the strengths of the human instrument, including responsiveness and the ability to adapt, understand, clarify, and summarize information, are all important, though so is acknowledging the limitations of the human instrument. That said, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) urged that “the human instrument has shortcomings and biases… Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them” (p. 16). With the researcher, me, as the instrument, my many biases and lenses are consistently in operation, and with that certainly comes limitations.

For example, as a White male (who is also a former school administrator and current district office employee) conducting interviews with educators of Color, any and everything I ask and report is laced in power and positionality. Therefore, how can I ensure that this “research” is important, meaningful, affirming, valuable, relevant, and respectful for the project participants? How can I ensure reciprocity? Similarly, Peshkin (2000) inquired:

What can be done about what the researcher does not know and cannot learn? I judge what I have managed to learn to be useful or not, I judge where it can fit in my line of reasoning, and I judge what extent of qualification I must attach to what I believe I can conclude. (p. 9)
These are deeply important questions in this project that I revisit often. The following section on my positionality, inspired in part by Kirkland’s (2016) *Why I study culture and why it matters*, is intended: (1) to outline my research identity and why I want to do this research and how I think it could be (pragmatically) helpful in some way, and (2) to humanize and self-examine White educators’ criticality towards more responsible and accountable efforts towards more racial equity in K-12 systems and schooling.

**Positionality, Bias, and Admitted Assumptions**

I am a White, male, middle class, mostly English and Scottish, native English speaking, U.S. born, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-aged, able-bodied, Unitarian Universalist. With my positionality comes historical and intersectional privilege, biases, and assumptions that I intend to honestly declare and dissect. Part of my approach in this research is to take a critical look at the roles and impacts of White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest and beyond, including my own efforts both past and present. In my ongoing efforts of learning and engagement in educational equity work in general, but mainly racial equity, I have individually and collaboratively strived to consistently improve my own racial and critical consciousness of the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, language, nation of origin, sexuality, faith identity, age, and ability on our world, communities, and history. As part of this ongoing life work and consciousness-raising, and by working to always begin by humbly and critically looking inward, I acknowledge that each of the social and positional aspects of my individual identity are entangled with some form of advantage and/or power, both historically and contemporarily. With that advantage, I believe, comes responsibility and accountability,
and that is what has brought me here with a critical eye towards my own role and impact in racial equity work in education. Additionally, and with an open and perpetual invitation, I encourage fellow White educators, as well as those of other intersecting advantage(s), to join me.

With that said, a little more about me and my positionality seems important before delving too deep into this research and the pragmatic “findings” and considerations that I hope it bears for others in some way. When I reflect on my time and my experiences with racial equity work in K-12 public education, I try to use myself as an example for some of the concepts (e.g. contending with whiteness, white saviorism) that I believe would benefit from a more critical suspicion and humility amongst my fellow White educators. I believe this is especially true given the reality that the U.S. still has racism without anyone wanting to admit to being racist, thus contributing to the persistence of racial inequality in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). I try to reckon and contend with my racialized story, my “racial heart” (Allen & Matias, 2013, p. 304), my biases and racial privilege, as well as the countless times I could have been a better and more equitable educator, in the hopes that I can continue learning and growing, and in hopes that fellow White educators may join me in such critical reflection and ensuing action.

As a White male educator, I believe it is important to ask myself, both younger me and present-day me, the following questions, which were previously cited in chapter two in the section on white saviorism: “Do you feel anxious, guilty, apathetic, or angry when talking about race? Why or why not? Do you love being White? Why or why not?
Do you love people of Color? Why or why not?” (Allen & Matias, 2013, p. 304). Such a deeper interrogation of the social constructions that influence my “racial heart” can also be developed by asking even less common questions such as why did I feel the need to advocate, serve, or protect the students I worked with, and personally, why was I the rightful one to do such a thing? (Allen & Matias, 2013, p. 304). If you are a White teacher reading this now, how would you answer these questions? And what questions do you have?

As a classroom teacher on the west-side of Chicago for 10 years, I worked with mostly Latino/a/x students and communities, many of whom were economically disadvantaged and who were systematically denied access to many of the privileges and advantages that I benefitted from due to my positionality. Undoubtedly, I needed to be more aware of that then, and I certainly need to continue sharpening my understanding and learning now. I believe I would have benefitted from being called in to better understand the systems operating around me, how they benefited me, and how I could actively interrupt and disrupt them. When I reflect back on my role as a teacher in Chicago, I find myself provocatively reflective in regard to what Freire (1970/2000) often referred to the “oppressor consciousness” (p. 58) as those who:

...truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. (p. 60)

Early in my career, younger me wanted to teach in Chicago Public Schools because I thought the schools and students needed me. I realize now that they needed me to listen to them, trust them, and be in solidarity with and alongside them. My resilient and
brilliant students in Chicago who faced racism, classism, sexism, linguicism, xenophobia, and ableism - whether I was aware of it or not - had to navigate them without my deeper understanding, and I regret that deeply. Today I strive to own who I was in the pursuit of who I want to be. I am hopeful that the inclusion of this information helps highlight the importance and meaning that can be found by looking inward and personal reflection, but also that my framing and detailing of my positionality does not take away from the importance and prioritization of counter-stories as the primary perspective of importance in this project.

Furthermore, I also acknowledge that with my positionality came assumptions that are important to explicitly list. Those assumptions are that White educators do in fact impact racial equity work in schools, and that they play a prominent and yet-to-be-fully-actualized role in the work as well. I also assumed that White people have the potential to be part of improving racial equity in education, which admittedly has undertones and implications of white saviorism. Additionally, I assumed that Black and Black biracial educators would want to engage in conversation with me, that they would find the conversation valuable and meaningful, and that they would want to talk to me, a White person, more about White people, which admittedly and problematically centers whiteness even further. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) addressed the reality of researchers who are members of the dominant culture working with participants who experience marginalization when they wrote:

Participants in studies of marginalized groups by race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are often suspicious of those [researchers] who are members of the dominant culture doing research on people of oppressed groups. They often worry about the researcher’s agenda and how they will be portrayed as participants. The
point of critical research is generally to do research *with* people not *on* people. (p. 64)

This will be discussed in more depth in later sections on critical research as well as on participant selection.

**Critical Qualitative Research**

This research/inquiry is inspired by critical qualitative research. Further, critical research in general aims to purposefully and specifically address particular and inequitable distributions of power both societally and within research itself. What makes critical research *critical* is the theoretical framework informing the particular study/inquiry, as well as the prioritization of seeking to more deeply understand and challenge the interacting and structural power relations in operation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) urged that “there is no one way to do critical interpretive, qualitative inquiry,” and critical qualitative researchers are all “stuck in the present, working against the past, as we move into a politically charged and challenging future” (p. xv). By utilizing the interacting threads of both the critique and challenge of historical and contemporary power relations and structures, critical research aims to bring about social change as a result of the study, at times with and alongside participants, such as in critical participatory action research (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Further, Kemmis et al. (2014) asserted that critical action research illustrates the fact that social movements are educational movements in that they involve the individual and collective education of people in social and political life, and can take place both informally or in formal K-16 educational settings. Ultimately, in critical studies, “the assumption is that power in combination with hegemonic social structures results in the
marginalization and oppression of those without power,” and critical research “seeks to
make these dynamics visible so that people can challenge power relations” (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016, p. 61).

In the context of this research/inquiry, I believe that exploring and exposing the
nuanced racial dynamics and inequities in K-12 public education are the prerequisite to
operationalizing more responsive, and hopefully generative racial equity work in K-12
settings. Additionally, at this current time in history (2022), and in the living history and
evolution of academic and critical qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argued
that “There is a shifting center to the [qualitative] project: the avowed humanistic and
social justice commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the
interacting individual” (p. xvi). This new center, with humanism and social justice at its
core, is what feeds the “liberal and radical politics of action” and what unites critical
researchers from critical race theory, to ethnic and cultural studies researchers (Denzin &
Lincoln, p. xvi, 2018). In the quest for a better and more equitable future, however, first
comes an honest and critical look at both the past and present.

It’s also important to note that critical research is not as simple as it may sound,
especially in both acknowledging the racist past and lineage of qualitative research in
general, but also in research/inquiry projects like this where power dynamics are blatantly
on display in the context of the inquiry as well as the research happening in the inquiry.
More specifically, as a White male researcher interested in qualitative research with
Black and Black biracial educators, the additional (white) elephant in the room is that my
raced and gendered positionality’s historical role is one fraught with power and
oppression of what hooks (1990a) and Fine (1994) called the Other. More specifically, Fine (1994) argued that “Much of qualitative research has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the ‘Other’” by speaking ‘of’ and ‘for’ others” (p. 70).

More specifically in the realm of qualitative research, Erickson (2010) pointed specifically to ethnography, and the notion of going into the field, as born of a desire, or perhaps fear, in order to better understand the (often non-White) Other. Acknowledging this, as well as the history of qualitative research, is nonetheless invaluable and necessary.

That said, from the early beginnings, qualitative research was complicit with and productive for a racist agenda and project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In Paris and Winn’s (2014) conceptualization of humanizing research, they argued for the centering of historically marginalized and oppressed young people as an act of resistance against the historied colonizing approach of qualitative inquiry. Further, Paris and Winn (2014) powerfully stated:

The history of qualitative and ethnographic work seeking, at worst, to pathologize, exoticize, objectify, and name as deficient communities of Color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond, and at best, to take and gain through research but not to give back, stretches back across the 19th century and forward to the current day. (p. xvi)

This statement lands with me, admittedly, with loads of white fragility and imposter syndrome as a White male “academic researcher.” In my attempts towards more humanizing approaches in this project, threaded with elements of critical research as both a methodology and paradigmatic worldview, I strived to enact “humanizing approaches... that involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness-
raising for both researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). In other words, I aimed to prioritize relationships, coalitions, and solidarity with the participants through dialogue and the sharing of ideas related to racial equity in K-12.

There are certain elements of critical action research that I believe are important to detail as well. More specifically, in the early 1990s, (Fine, 1994) shared that “The whispers of a collective of activist researchers can be heard struggling… seeking to work with, but not romanticize, subjugated voices, searching for moments of social justice, they are inventing strategies of qualitative analysis and writing against Othering” (p. 81). In Fine’s (2018) *Just methodology in contentious times*, close to 30 years later, she still urged for a “lighting of the fuse” to the critical action research and imagination (p. 113).

Perhaps the last 26 years had not amplified the “whispers” of activist researchers enough, and maybe the urgency and need for such work is stronger now in this current moment in time, a more recent time in which Giroux (2019) asserted that democracy in the U.S. is eroding due to the destructive confluence of neoliberalism and White supremacist ideologies. Further, Giroux (2019) argued that the pedagogical task of raising consciousness is an avenue to interrupting and disrupting the power of neoliberalism’s notions of individualism and meritocracy, which consequently view inequities as personal and individual issues, not systemic ones. Giroux (2019) went on to declare that progressives need a new way of thinking and communicating about inequity, and I agree. Perhaps the time to whisper about race and inequity in education is over. Perhaps more majoritarian White educators like me need to (re)build and (re)evolve our approaches to
and understanding of racial consciousness and equity in education. More specifically, Giroux (2019) urged:

Such [new] thinking must be sensitive to rejecting any hint of moral righteousness and the colonizing stance of preaching the gospel to vulnerable populations. Dispossessed populations must not be denied the tools and spaces to narrate their own stories. We need an array of tools and platforms to consider and unmask how dominant power works and impacts on peoples’ lives. At the same time, these tools must do justice to the everyday experiences, events, emotions, modes of identification and investments that people inhabit and experience. (p. 40)

That said, how can this research avoid moral righteousness and the centering of whiteness and saviorism? Additionally, how can this project avoid the objectification of Black and Black biracial voices and experiences? Instead, how can this project forge communal bonds in solidarity towards a more common and just good, which is non-existent without social and racial justice?

Further, in Fine’s (2018) conclusion to *Just methodology in contentious times*, she highlighted Greene’s (2008) notion of “wide-awakeness.” Moreover, Greene (2008) shared: “I use the term wide-awakeness… [because] without the ability to think about yourself to reflect on your life, there's really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn't come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious” (p. 17). When I reflect on my own journey towards more “wide-awakeness,” I think first of younger me, and my delayed and therefore somewhat dormant racial consciousness in the earlier stages of my life, and I wonder how to most productively wrestle with that. I recall Malcolm X, and how he reflected on his own younger adult life in Harlem when he said, “How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking white” (X, 1965, p. 54), and
then his later reflection, “Through all of this time in my life [in Harlem before he went to jail], I really was dead - mentally dead. I just didn't know that I was” (p. 125). It takes courage to own your story and past, and it also seems necessary in the ongoing growth towards who you want to become.

Literally as I wrote the above words in the spring of 2020, newsflashes popped onto my computer screen: COVID-19 magnifies racial disparities, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Amy Cooper, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter Protests, U.S. cities burn, Federal troops arrive in Portland, Jacob Blake, Major sports leagues boycott due to racial injustice. To not be wide-awake at this moment, at a time of racial reckoning in the year 2020, I do not believe one can claim ignorance anymore. There can be no ignorance to the racial reality and the pernicious and visceral impact(s) of racism, and now to the widespread resistance efforts across the U.S. Further, as a White man, as a White majoritarian educator in the U.S., to not be wide-awake, to not be “curious, and often furious” (Greene, 2008, p. 17), in my humble opinion, is simply a farce.

It’s interesting to note Fine’s (2018) acknowledgement that her upbringing did not prepare her to be wide-awake to social justice, and that instead, she was “lulled by the anesthetic of whiteness” and that in that lull, everything (racial inequities) seemed “natural” (p. 113). However as she more and more “awakened,” Fine (2018) realized that there were “obligations of wide-awakeness” (p. 114), and that among the obligations were to inquire, gather, study, write, and teach from and alongside the social movements and movers “who most intimately understand injustice, to design research collaboratively so we might imagine and mobilize for a different tomorrow; and never to trust our own
solitary, privileged perspectives” (p. 115). I consider this my call-in for this research and project. In addition to listening, reading, and attempting to unlearn my own racism, this research perhaps can serve as a provocation for more learning and action towards more racial equity in K-12 education, with a critical emphasis on majoritarian White responsibility and accountability.

Further, in this research/inquiry, the centering of Black and Black biracial educators’ lived experience and experiential knowledge, with intentional efforts to avoid exploitation and more so co-construct inherent value that is conducive to action, will be key. Admittedly, this is more complex than it may sound. Tuck and Yang’s (2014) critique of social science research is important to consider in this vein:

Social science often works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification. However, the same stories of pain and humiliation are part of the collective wisdom that often informs the writings of researchers who attempt to position their intellectual work as decolonization. Indeed, to refute the crime, we may need to name it. (p. 223)

That said, by asking Black and Black biracial educators to share their narratives and lived experiences with me, I risk (re)traumatizing them, and for what? For whom? This research may give me a doctorate degree. What will it give the participants? How may it impact the landscape of K-12 racial equity work? Additionally, I wrestle with these critically important questions inspired by Tuck and Yang’s (2014) calls for critical reflection: How can this proposed work cautiously avoid simply “documenting damage”? (p. 226). How can I as a researcher/inquirer actively resist being a “damage-centered researcher”? (p. 227). How can I avoid eagerly launching into a “pain-based inquiry”? (p. 227). And finally, how can I be more aware of the “fetish for pain narratives”? (p. 230).
I, similar to Fine (2018), admittedly only know injustice as a “cognitive acquaintance, an empathic model of solidarity, and a deep academic/political project” (p. 116), and this is due to the unearned intersectional privilege I have due to my positionality. One of many things I continue to try to learn about as a privileged White male in racial equity work is knowing my situational and contextual role(s) and place(s). This research is based on the premise that White allied voices and actions towards more racial equity should be directly informed by the experiential knowledge and insights of peers of Color whose voices may be, and often are, missing or spoken for or over by majoritarian White educators and administrators, including myself.

Ultimately, I have so often cited Fine’s (2018) work because I believe it symbolizes a call to the collective “igniting of the fuse” towards what could be socially and racially possible through critical research and action from majoritarian White educators. Writing from a self-critiqued racial and positional place of privilege, Fine (2018) speaks to others from similar places of privilege, which is one thing this research also hopes to do. Fine (2018) goes on to wonder, all the while extending the invite to other privileged, would-be-scholars and learners: “The question I seek to address is what, if any, contribution toward justice might scholars, researchers, theorists, teachers, and writers offer? With whom, and toward what ends?” (p. 116). Critical research involves the ongoing and sustained effort to actualize efforts towards more social and racial justice, to create “with others delicate spaces of collective criticality” (Fine, 2018, p. 117), and to bear witness to and document injustice(s) towards more wide-awareness,
towards the provocation of seeing one’s own role and responsibility in co-
(re)constructing a better and more just future with more possibility.

As mentioned earlier, while sitting and writing in the spring of 2020 in my
physical and conceptual place of both privilege and safety, I saw the names and hashtags
pixelate my computer screen: #ahmaudarbery, #breonnataylor, #georgefloyd,
#jacobblake. As these names are said and remembered, Fine’s (2018) words
simultaneously disturb and provoke my mind:

When morbid symptoms saturate the everyday, and bodies are falling and dreams
curdling in our midst, when public life, institutions, and human rights are
shattered in plain sight, social scientists have an obligation to bear witness, forge
solidarities, craft collective inquiry, and produce documents for and with
communities and policy, for theory and organizing, for teaching in the university
and on the streets. (p. 123)

That said, this project is not intended to be construed in any way as a path or solution to
more racial educational equity, nor am I any hint of a (White) savior or trailblazer.
Everything I have written about race and racial consciousness has been said before me,
from people and communities of Color who have lived and breathed and felt it. I am but a
single perspective, bearing witness, seeking meaningful coalitions, with a critically
ambitious and suspicious eye, with the goal of more critical mind and actional body.

Scrolling my newsfeed and hashtagging isn’t activism, I know. Reflecting isn’t
activism. Processing privilege isn’t activism. Writing a dissertation isn’t activism. Being
an ally, or accomplice, or whatever term one prefers, is only impactful if those terms live
and operate as verbs, not nouns. And actions live and breathe by acting - in the schools,
streets, policies, and theory-making, too. Race-based inequities in education must be
inquired about, collaborated on, and responded to with race-conscious responses and
ensuing considerations, provocations, and actions. And the voices and experiences of people of Color must be centered, acknowledged, legitimized, and honored.

**Bricolage**

When I began researching qualitative inquiry and research methodologies, it quickly became fairly unwieldy. There was much to consider, paradigmatically and ontologically speaking, but also methodologically speaking. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) affirmed my initial hesitation to settle on any one frame of qualitative research methodology when they asserted that “the open-ended nature of the qualitative research project leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single, umbrella-like paradigm over the entire project” (p. xv). In the search for the right fit, I came across and was drawn to bricolage as an approach to qualitative research.

Bricolage is from a French word that translates to “do it yourself,” and as a qualitative methodology, it prizes a resourceful and reflexive approach that uses the materials, tools, and norms of the community and people in which the study is situated (Maxwell, 2013). Further, bricolage, whose researchers are referred to as bricoleurs, are resourceful, quick to adapt to unique situations, and strive to produce unique responses to problems in practice. Maxwell (2013) argued that bricolage was furthered mostly by Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2018), as well as Kincheloe and Berry (2004) and later with Kincheloe et al. (2017), all of which are leaned upon in this section to extrapolate the important methodological elements and considerations for the bricoleur.

Further, Denzin & Lincoln (2018) outlined five kinds of bricoleurs: the methodological, interpretive, theoretical, political, and critical bricoleur. While each of
these bricoleurs has unique aspects to them, one thing they all share is a “pragmatic, strategic, and self-reflexive” approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 2). I feel that I identify with elements of each type of bricoleur. More specifically in this project, I strove to be a methodological bricoleur that uses elements of multiple methodologies, as I used elements of interview studies and influences from the frameworks critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness studies (CWS). I also aimed to situate and move between the critical and pragmatic paradigms, and center down through intensive self-reflection. In bricolage, such an approach is a choice of practice.

I also strove to be an interpretive bricoleur, one who acknowledges that research is interactive and influenced by one’s individual and personal history as well as all of the intersectional social identities at play (including race, class, gender, etc.; and similar to intersectionality in CRT). The theoretical bricoleur is situated within many interpretive paradigms (CRT and CWS in this research), that can both compete and overlap with each other. I also aspired to be a political bricoleur who acknowledges the naturally political nature of qualitative research, and who would argue that “science is power,” including social science, and that “there is no value free science” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 12). This research is not value-free, and it will likely be perceived and characterized in many different ways by many different people with differing beliefs on race, equity, and education. Finally, I certainly tried to be a critical bricoleur, which as outlined before with critical research, is very relevant in this research and project.

Additionally, in Critical pedagogy and qualitative research: Advancing the bricolage, Kincheloe et al. (2017) described bricolage as an “emancipatory research
construct” that “refers to moving beyond the blinders of particular disciplines and peering through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production” (p. 244). Such a new world of qualitative research requires a new and higher level of researcher self-consciousness, as well as a growing understanding of the many contexts in which any research/inquiry is happening. The bricoleur, according to Kincheloe et al. (2017), acknowledges and appreciates the fact that research is a “power-driven act,” and the “bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power and privilege or the lack thereof. Indeed, it is grounded on an epistemology of complexity” (p. 244). As acknowledged earlier, there are many different power and racial dynamics inherent in this research proposal that add layers of complexity, and that will influence how I (White man) interpret the shared words and lived experiences of the Black and Black biracial participants. With that said, this project does not assert any “findings” of absolute, positivist truth, but instead offers invitations for critical and compassionate inquiry and action.

Moreover, in such an epistemology of complexity, bricolage can be conceptualized as a “counter-colonial move” in research that is openly critical of any knowledge and/or ways of knowing that claim any universal acceptance of truth (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 172). Bricolage is centered in criticality, particularly in power and the complexity of social dimensions. In the process of research and by intentionally avoiding the application of an umbrella paradigm or methodological approach to research, bricoleurs are afforded a “conceptual distance that produces critical consciousness,” and such rising consciousness can help bricoleurs “reshape and
sophisticate social theory, research methods, and interpretive strategies, as they discerned new topics to be researched” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 169).

In the context of this research, bricolage created space for me to be present with and to center the Black and Black biracial educators’ social experiences and the complexities regarding racial inequality and injustice(s) in racial equity work in the predominantly White institutions of K-12 schools and districts in the Pacific Northwest. Additionally, in this research, I sought to uncover the overt and covert influences of power, race, ideology, whiteness, human consciousness, and culture. Additionally, bricoleurs, and critical researchers in general, employ a self-conscious criticism of themselves as researchers, which begins with an “enter into an investigation with their [researcher’s] assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them to the research” (Kincheloe et al., 2017, p. 243). Critical bricoleurs do not claim the safety or validity that a neutral stance holds in some established research traditions and methodologies, nor do they avoid acknowledging and addressing the operation of larger social, cultural, or political ideologies and contexts (including their own positionality). Instead, critical bricoleurs “often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very active research itself” (Kincheloe et al., 2017, p. 243).

Additionally, this research has the possibility of not only exposing some of the complex elements and actors in racial equity work in K-12 settings, but it also may illuminate the problematics of power differentials in the research itself, led by a White,
male, former administrator and current district office employee interviewing Black and
Black biracial educators. Perhaps this will (re)illuminate the need for a more racially
diverse K-12 educator force, which is an important part of working towards more racial
equity. Just as in critical bricolage, I hope this research can invite “new forms of
knowledge that inform policy decisions and political action in general” (Kincheloe et al.,
2011, p. 169), all through the lenses of criticality, humility, and sociohistorical
responsibility towards more racial equity in K-12 public education in the U.S.

It is also important to note that this research and the goals attached to it - which
include critically analyzing self and social inequality and injustice - is not a solution-
oriented project. Instead, as in the spirit of critical bricolage, I hoped that this
research/inquiry would be a generative experience for both myself as the
researcher/inquirer and the project participants. I am affirmed by the notion that critical
bricoleurs “avoid any notion of finality in the resolution of such dilemmas [in research],”
and that critical bricoleurs are comfortable with ambiguity as their research strives to
“alleviate human suffering and injustice even though they possess no final blueprint
alerting them as to how oppression takes place” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 173). In other
words, as stated earlier and throughout this proposal, I do not intend to frame this
research as providing any specific answers, solutions, nor breakthroughs. I admit and
acknowledge the power and racial dynamics that were at play in the project, as well as
the complexity, though one of the many things that drew me to bricolage was the fact that
bricoleurs not only understand such complexity and unpredictability, they expect it.
That said, in my quest towards more deeply understanding the roles and impacts of whiteness and of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, there were important opportunities throughout the project to lean in, acknowledge, and document the damage that majoritarian White educators (including me) have at times inflicted in efforts towards (or against) more racial justice. I sought to, with my best ability, be responsive, humble, responsible, and accountable, as I strove to carry this project out in a manner consistent with bricolage and the “hopes to contribute to an evolving criticality” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 169).

**Critical Race Methodology in Educational Research**

Race-based inequities in education should be explicitly inquired about, collaborated on, and responded to with race-conscious actions and responses, and while critical bricolage addresses race in important ways, such as in this example from Kincheloe et al. (2011): “bricoleurs seek to better understand both the forces of domination that affect the lives of individuals from race, class, gender, sexual, ethnic, and religious backgrounds outside of dominant culture(s) and the world views of such diverse peoples” (p. 169), race is not a focal point of critical bricolage. In the context of this research, a critical, race-conscious methodology and approach is both necessary and central. Therefore, this project also draws from elements of critical race methodology and counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

More specifically, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) argued for what they called critical race methodology (CRM) and outlined five important components in the centering of
race and racism in research methodology. Elements of CRM are used to influence this research in the following ways. First, CRM (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) forefronts race and racism, but is also aware of other forms of intersectional inequality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995, 2020). In this project, I, a White male researcher/inquirer, interviewed seven Black and Black biracial educators in both an exploratory way regarding racial equity work in K-12, but also in an intentional way in asking purposefully and critically about their perceptions of the role(s) and impact(s) of White educators in racial equity work. Second, CRM challenges the dominant ideology and thus explicitly addresses and challenges things like racial privilege and dominant positionalities, as well as the notion of objective research seeking findings about people of Color, instead of exploring ideas and experiences with and alongside them.

Third, CRM has a clear commitment to social justice and ultimately offers a response to racial and intersectional oppression. It is my hope that the considerations and provocations that emerged from this research humbly land in the hearts and minds of White educators, administrators, and predominantly White institutions. Fourth, CRM prioritizes the seeking and learning with and from counter-stories and the experiential knowledge of people of Color, as that knowledge is “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 129). As stated throughout, this critical qualitative research centered the voices and lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators as shared through interviews with me. Finally, and fifth, CRM seeks to understand a transdisciplinary perspective by looking at both historical and contemporary contexts.
This research and project does not shy away from the historical precedents that have led to contemporary racially inequitable realities, which are mostly outlined in chapter one and also in chapter five. Put differently, the problem of a K-12 public educational system in the United States that has historically maintained a predominantly White teaching force and has persistently underserved students of Color (academically, socially, emotionally) will be critically contextualized and historicized, as will my own privileged positionality and perspective as the researcher/inquirer.

As Solórzano & Yosso (2002) so clearly articulated on the matter, “Whether we refer to them as mono-vocals, master narratives, standard stories, or majoritarian stories, it is important to recognize the power of white privilege and constructing stories about race” (p. 131). I acknowledge that having carried out this research, I risked the repeating of harmful, historical qualitative research done by White folks on people and communities of Color. I also acknowledge that my interpretations of what was shared with me may distort the experiences of the project participants. That said, and in following the lead of Peshkin (2000), I strove for these risks to be consistently acknowledged, interrogated, and reflected upon in regard to the nature of interpretation and subjectivity in qualitative research - especially on matters concerning race coming from my White perspective.

Further, critical race methodology in education takes a critical lens to post-positivist research and theories about people of Color and the experiences of people of Color, which historically have been constructed in deficit language (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The five aforementioned themes orient this research towards uncovering the
complex realities that have resulted from the presence of potentially racist ideas, policies, systems, and actions, and this research strives to challenge previously held “normative” or “neutral” principles and practices in school racial equity work (Solórzano & Yosso, 2012, p. 27). By prioritizing the counter-stories of Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest, I hope to better understand the roles and impacts of White racial equity participants in efforts towards achieving more racial equity in K-12 schools. Ultimately, a CRT framework in education, including in qualitative research on education, will “document the racial realism contexts of schools, colleges, and communities and how/why this was important for research and social action” (Parker, 2015, p. 200).

Additionally, Parker and Lynn (2016) described a tension that is situated within CRT’s conflicts with and connections to qualitative inquiry. More specifically, there is tension in the “positionality and privilege of whiteness and in terms of who gets to tell the critical race story,” as well as the problematic nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants including but not limited to “who the research is for, what purpose it serves, and why the research is even being conducted” (Parker & Lynn, 2016, p. 148). Ultimately, Parker and Lynn (2016) argued several important and relevant points with implications for this research, and they shared several examples and considerations regarding research grounded in CRT methodology, which are addressed in this chapter.

More specifically, Parker and Lynn (2016) outlined that the researcher’s declaration of their own standpoint and storytelling is important, as is the self-critique of one’s privilege and authority (citing Ellis, 1995). Parker and Lynn (2016) also cited
Bloom’s (1996) focus on nonunitary subjectivity, the notion that there are “nonsynchronist positions of where persons of Color are at racially and in certain situations” (p. 149), and that not only documenting this but also noting how it can play out in different settings is important. This is extremely important in the context of this project in regard to generalization and validity threat (which will be discussed later in the chapter), as I do not intend to generalize about Black or Black biracial individuals. Parker and Lynn (2016) also asserted that it is important to honestly address the power dynamics and tensions between researchers and participants of Color, as well as to consider “widening the lens,” that is, taking into account more and additional perspectives other than the Black-White paradigm (p. 150). I discuss the idea of “widening the lens” further in the section on project participants.

**Interview**

As a White male researcher/inquirer looking to study race and racism in education, I acknowledge that there are many things about race and racism that I’ll never truly know, and that it is my job and responsibility to learn more and do more. While in this research I aimed to take a critical look at the operation of racism that school-based racial equity work aims to threaten, as well as the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in racial equity work, I acknowledge that the aforementioned racisms (systemic, institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal) - which are all entrenched in the history of both the U.S. and K-12 public education - are phenomena I only know of cognitively and vicariously, not personally. This fact alone confirms an admitted limitation in my perspective and voice as a researcher/inquirer. Further, because I am
looking to critically inquire about and describe the operation of racism in education as well as the potential roles and impacts of White majoritarian educators, I chose to employ elements of qualitative interview study with educator participants of Color. I will now outline the framing of the interviews that are at the heart and soul of this research project.

In *Learning from strangers, the art and method of qualitative interview studies*, Weiss (1994) argued that qualitative interviews have long been the tool of excavating much of the important work in the social sciences, including our understanding of our society and ourselves. Further, qualitative interviews are a tool for inquiries about the nature of social life, about cultures and values, and interviews provide an opportunity for rich descriptions of phenomena often unknown (Weiss, 1994). More specifically, Weiss (1994) asserted:

> The celebrations and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no record except in their memories. And there are, of course, no observers of the internal events of thought and feeling except those to whom they occur. Most of the significant events of people’s lives can become known to others only through interview. (p. 2)

In this project, I utilized interview as a methodology to uncover both the successes and shortcomings of racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the more deeply personal and professional experiences of the seven project participants.

In another take on qualitative interviewing, Seidman (2006) outlined a phenomenological qualitative interview methodology that encourages the interviewer to more deeply engage with the narratives of participants and their unique ways of knowing. While I did not strictly follow Seidman’s (2006) three-part framework for phenomenological interviews, there are foundational elements of his approach to
interviewing that helped shape this project. For example, Seidman (2006) stated that at the heart of being human is the symbolization of our unique experiences through the use of language, and of story, and that interviewing is a simple mode of inquiry into those stories. By participating in interviews, participants engaged in a process of selecting and recalling important experiential details, reflecting, and therefore making sense of and sharing their experiences. Further, Seidman (2006) argued that in the process of re-telling of story and experience, “Individuals’ consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (p. 7). Ultimately, utilizing interviews helped address two goals of this research: to affirm and center the importance of the individual participants and their experiences, and to strive towards stronger and more connected, collaborative, and interracial communities towards more racial equity in K-12.

In the realm of interview, I also drew from research interviewing as discourse in an attempt to highlight the unique and situated sociocultural contexts and narrative accounts of the project participants (Mishler, 1986). More specifically, the interview design and process will be informed by the following:

1) Interviews are speech events; 2) the discourse of interviews is constructed jointly by interviewers and respondents; 3) analysis and interpretations are based on a theory of discourse and meaning; 4) the meanings of questions and answers are contextually grounded. (Mishler, 1986, p. ix)

In other words, I did not enter interviews with the participants with a rigid and highly structured plan that was written in stone. In fact, I acknowledge and defend this intentional choice as part of the critical bricolage that hovers over and beneath this entire
project. Additionally, a glaring complexity of this project is the idea that I must address
and be reflexive to the power dynamics at play by owning the reality of an insider-
outsider, researcher-participant power dynamic between me and the project participants.
In my efforts towards such ownership and honest acknowledgement, I feared what
Merriam and Tisdell (2016) framed as “a word of caution” to the researcher, while citing
Pillow (2013): that a researcher/inquirer “Can go overboard in discussing these issues
[positionality], so that it appears that the study is more about the researcher than the
participants and the findings of the study” (p. 65). This only reinforces the entire
complexity looming over this entire project: how can centering the roles and impacts
White people and whiteness be used as a method to disrupt and deconstruct racial
inequity and White supremacy? And is a White author and inquirer the right one to do
such a thing?

As discourses are grounded in both theory and contextualized settings and times, I
also strove to center the notion of reflexivity and the nature of dialectic process between
me, the researcher/inquirer, and the project participants. San Pedro and Kinloch (2014)
differentiated between traditional academic research/writing and reflexive
research/writing, characterizing reflexivity as grounded in streams of consciousness,
ways of listening to and responding to one another in dialogue, and privileging “listening
with and not on or about” participants” (p. 22). Additionally, when listening is committed
to humanization, listening requires an additional attentiveness to body language,
utterances, voice, backgrounds, and histories of the participants, which can create a
deeper trust. San Pedro and Kinloch (2014) referred to this co-created sense of trust
through dialogue as the “space between,” or the “dialogic spiral” (p. 30) that allows “people to ask, answer, and receive questions that transcend space-time limitations” (p. 40). In chapter four, I detail a couple examples of what I perceived to be powerful moments during the interviews that took place in the “space between,” which is where I agree that trust and relationship were deepened.

Similarly, Green (2014) outlined what she called a “Double Dutch Methodology,” (p. 149) which although centered in more participant observation, also prioritized a reflexivity that entailed “keeping time and rhythm [with participants],” expecting interactions to be “complicated, contextually stylized, and improvisational,” and inviting “reflexivity, relevance, and reciprocity” (p. 149). Put differently, the presence of, attitudes of, behaviors of, and relationships between the researcher/inquirer and project participants not only matters, but are also interconnected with all aspects of the research design, implementation, analysis, and interpretations (Green, 2014).

Further, to do my best to ensure that this research/inquiry did not objectify the participants voices and experiences, I strove towards “humanizing approaches” that “involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness-raising for both the researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). While interviewing has many opportunities to uncover much depth of experience and knowledge, I also acknowledge the many risks for participants of Color, as well as the power structures at play with me inquiring about and directing the respondents to very personal topics of matter in this project.
This project is clearly steeped in race, and also in culture, and Kirkland (2014) urged the study of culture as a means of better understanding human civilization and its potential for “(re)volution” towards “prosperity and justice, purpose and improvement” (p. 181). The study of culture, thus, is important because “culture has consequences for real people” (p. 198) and qualitative projects, Kirkland (2014) asserted, are “a way to see and read it” (p. 181) towards deeper understanding and action. This research aims to share some of the participants’ experiences and perspectives in an effort towards improved, more responsive, and more sustained understanding and approaches to racial equity work in predominantly White K-12 settings.

**Identifying Project Participants**

Regarding the methodology of seeking out and inviting the participation of project participants, I utilized a modified version of snowball sampling. More specifically, I identified and asked five colleagues of Color in the Pacific Northwest, who are familiar with me and my beliefs and efforts in K-12 racial equity work, to assist in the recruitment of Black and Black biracial peers and colleagues who also work/ed in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest to be part of this project. I later refer to these five colleagues as my “critical mentors,” as they have each played a significant role in my own racial, local, and critical-consciousness rising, and I deeply respect and value them in many personal and professional ways. The introduction letter to my critical mentors is included as Appendix A, as well as an informed consent form in Appendix C, as some of my discussions and collaborations with the critical mentors are also referenced in chapter five. I tried to make sure that the introduction letters shared a strong and careful
explanation of the purpose of the research/inquiry to participants, clarity on what will be
done with the data, and outlined potential opportunities for making this a worthwhile
experience for the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Of my five critical mentors, three are Black, one is Black biracial, and one
identifies as mixed Asian. Additionally, I should be clear in stating that these five critical
mentors were immensely important in the crafting and execution of this project as well.
Seidman (2016) conceptualized this role that I refer to as “critical mentor” as “informal
gatekeepers,” or those “who are widely respected and looked to for guidance when
decisions about whether or not to support an effort are made,” and those with “moral
suasion” (p. 45). Connecting with and learning from my critical mentors, getting their
feedback, and graciously working from their recommendations for project participants, I
believe, was a key to this project’s authenticity and success. They were honest and
upfront with me about the project’s aims, its perceived risks, and openly shared critical
ideas on how it could be most meaningful for the participants and beneficial in the realm
of K-12 racial equity work here in the Pacific Northwest.

Once my critical mentors helped me identify interested participants, I made initial
contact with them through an email introduction to begin building a relationship
(Appendix B). Throughout the project, I consistently reflected and re-assessed the
immense responsibility to proceed ethically and meaningfully in this work, because while
this research was a project to me, it was an “intrusion into the lives of the participants”
and required “the continual creation and renegotiation of trust, intimacy, and reciprocity”
(Maxwell, 2013, p. 92). Additionally, and drawing on elements of critical action research
via interviewing, participants were selected and invited to engage with this project’s pragmatic effort to improve K-12 racial equity work by helping co-construct considerations for future racial equity work in education as a result of their lived experiences. I intended for the participants not to feel that research was being done about or on them as opposed to with and alongside them, and hoped that that we could together inspire new ideas and possibilities for sharing this project and its eventual findings/interpretations/considerations with other school districts and educators. Further, my goal was not to determine any context-free association or generalization between Black and Black biracial educators’ experiences, nor about White educators’ roles and impacts on racial equity work. Instead, I hope this project illuminates the complex and nuanced phenomena that can happen when predominantly White institutions (PWIs) engage in racial equity work in K-12 settings. The shared data and interpretations in chapters four and five highlight social processes that may be likely to occur in similar PWIs, which is across most of the U.S. in K-12 settings, even though I do not assert generalizability.

For most of the participants, we connected via phone or Zoom prior to the first interview. After initially connecting with participants and confirming their interest and answering questions on both the project, its aims, and logistics, I shared a consent form. In that form (Appendix D), I presented the nature of the study, as well as what the commitment for participants would be. Via informal contacts such as phone and email, we confirmed the time and date(s of interviews, all of which were determined by the
participants’ needs and desires and conducted online via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Interview Questions**

As a means to learn with and from the seven participants, I used an interview protocol. I designed the interview questions (see Appendix E) to explore the participants’ experiences, roles, impacts, attitudes, and behaviors regarding K-12 school equity work, including explicit questions on White educators’ participation and impact. In the interest of preserving participant confidentiality, I only collected general information from participants including school level, approximate educator and student demographics, general school racial equity efforts, and any adopted frameworks and/or models in use (i.e. *Courageous Conversations*). In the collection of this information, I aimed to be mindful of how and what information is shared in the study so as not to identify the participants, their schools, or school communities.

In thinking on how best to structure these interviews, I also considered Seidman’s (2006) three-part phenomenological interview structure, though as a bricoleur I did not follow all of them precisely as written. Further, in Seidman’s (2006) model, interview one is focused on the participants’ life history as connected to the topic of study. Interview two focuses on the details of the experience, in this case it would be on school-based racial equity work. Finally, interview three focuses on the reflective aspect of the meaning of their experience. With regard to the “meaning,” Seidman (2006) clarified: “The question of ‘meaning’ is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may
play a part in the participants’ thinking. Rather, it addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life” (p. 18).

Considering the deeply personal and emotional aspects of talking about race and racism, I agree with Seidman’s (2006) logic with respect to the three-part structure with each interview serving a purpose both individually and collectively. However, I am also mindful of the approach and value of the responsiveness and improvisational latitude afforded to the bricoleur (Kincheloe et al., 2017), and humanizing approaches (Paris & Winn, 2014) and the dialogic spiral that “allow people [participants] to ask, answer, and receive questions that transcend space-time limitations” (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2014, p. 40). Ultimately, the personal, intellectual, and emotional lives and experiences of the participants, as well as their expressed needs and wants, trumped any pre-scripted methodology, and I strove to refine the process to be most respectful and effective in first respecting the participants, and second, addressing the research questions.

**Data Collection Procedures**

With the health and well-being of both participants and self taking precedence in the COVID-19 era that this research/inquiry was situated within, I used Zoom video calls to connect with six of the participants which I recorded, transcribed, coded, and took notes and analytic memos on both during and after the interviews. One participant chose to connect on the phone and asked that our conversation not be recorded, which is explained in more detail in chapter four.

**Coding**
I utilized qualitative coding as my major strategy for categorizing interview data. Saldaña (2016) defined a code in qualitative inquiry as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data,” which includes interview transcripts (p. 4). Coding is simply one way of analyzing qualitative data, it is not “the way,” and Saldaña (2016) urged caution towards those who both “demonize the method outright” and those who “swear unyielding affinity to codes,” also known as “coding fetishism” (p. 3). After initially laughing at the notion of coding fetishism, I was affirmed with the realization that Saldaña’s (2016) approach in *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, which details 33 coding methods and analytic possibilities, is based in very similar elements of both bricolage and the research and data analysis approach of the bricoleur. More specifically, Saldaña (2016) is clear that he, nor his text, subscribe to one specific research methodology.

Saldaña (2016) also asserted that just like in any strong research, one should consider a breadth of perspectives, including purposeful juxtaposition with opposite viewpoints, and that “No one, including myself, can claim final authority on the utility of coding or the “best” way to analyze qualitative data” (p. 3). Ultimately, all researchers and their positionalities, as well as all research questions, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks are context-specific. That said, a pragmatic stance towards research in the social sciences and human inquiry requires maintaining an open mind for not only how to conduct the research/inquiry, but also the tools and methods for data collection, analysis, and eventual interpretations (Saldaña, 2011, 2016).
I based my approach on a more inductive strategy, sometimes referred to as open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), which prioritizes the responses of participants prior to any ideas or hypothesis on what is important. By analyzing the participants’ responses prior to generating coding categories, I then established frequency counts and looked for patterns in the responses of the participants. Saldaña (2016) defined patterns as “Repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action data that appear more than twice,” which helps the researcher determine “Somewhat stable indicators of humans’ ways of living and working to render the world” (p. 6). Some of these patterns were unique, while others were more consistent and wide-reaching. Ultimately, codes and patterns help researchers discover and establish participants’ “five Rs: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, coding was a recurring practice both during and after data collection as part of my data analysis, and similar to the framework of bricolage where no one framework or methodology is followed exclusively, coding can also be a heuristic, discovery-based phenomenon that changes and adapts as the process of research and learning unfolds (Saldaña, 2016).

Additionally, I also drew from what Maxwell (2013) outlined as three-part categorization analysis in coding. More specifically, Maxwell (2013) urged that the qualitative researcher must account for the conceptual distinction of “organizational,” “substantive,” and “theoretical” categories (p. 107). Organizational categories are typically topics or bins, with which to organize the data prior to further analysis. In this research, organizational bins included topics like site-specific demographics, racial equity policies and procedures, racial equity team and colleague dynamics, etc. Next,
substantive categories are based on the participants’ descriptions of concepts and beliefs. Substantive categories would be created based on participants’ own words, sometimes referred to as emic, and would be generated through the open-coding approach. These substantive categories could be used towards “developing a more general theory of what’s going on, but they don’t depend on this theory” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108).

This leads into the final category of analysis, the theoretical. The theoretical, Maxwell (2013) clarified, is placing the coded data into more of a theoretical framework, either a prior theory (etic, or in this case CRT or CWS) or from an inductively developed theory. For example, some participants spoke to the emotionality of White participants in efforts towards racial equity, which connected to the framework of CWS, or more specifically, white fragility (Accapaldi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2012, 2018). Additionally, the coded data also lead to an inductively developed theory – one I discuss in future chapters that is grounded in White educators’ criticality, humility, and sociohistorical. Maxwell (2013) also suggested the use of a graphic organizer to help organize the data in these categories, which he referred to as a “themes x data” matrix (p. 108). That said, I use a form of a graphic organizer to help organize and highlights participants’ responses to different questions in chapter four.

**Analytic Memos**

If a code is an important word or phrase associated with an interview transcript, an analytic memo is the written reflection on its meaning, the phenomenon, the participants, or the researcher/inquirer’s own learning and reflection (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos can be informal post-it notes on *ah-ha* moments, journals, blogs, or
electronic comments on transcripts and matrixes. Ultimately, Saldaña (2016) argued that “codes are nothing more than labels until they are analyzed,” and that analytic memos are an avenue towards more ongoing and deep analysis before, during, and after the research/inquiry (p. 44). I used analytic memos in an ongoing manner to avoid loss of valuable information and in case of recording equipment failure, but more importantly to capture nuances, impressions, insights, and subtle cues that may not be captured in the video.

In terms of topics of data analysis, analytic memos are opportunities to think about and document reflection on everything from emergent patterns, categories and themes, to personal and ethical dilemmas and future directions for the study. In this research, each of these pieces (and many more) lived in the form of analytic memos. As Stern (2007) offered, “If data are the building blocks of the developing theory, memos are the mortar” (p. 119).

*Technology and CAQDAS*

I intentionally chose not to utilize computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, often called CAQDAS. Moreover, I drew from Seidman’s (2016) suggestion to begin with working on paper copies, especially in regard to labeling and early open-coding. Seidman (2016) shared “My experience is that there is a significant difference between what one sees in a text presented on paper and the same text shown on screen, and that one’s response is different, too” (pp. 125-126). Further, Seidman (2016) suggested that something can be lost between screens and papers, and also that working with paper makes it even more important to stay organized, use consistent labeling and
coding, and to go back to the audio/video frequently to retrace high-interest and compelling moments and data. After an initial paper process, Seidman (2016) suggested transferring some of the excerpts and ideas into a computer file. Accordingly, I utilized simple tools with which I am familiar, including Microsoft Word, Excel, and Google Docs and Sheets, and after transcribing the interviews, creating analytic memos, and documenting and organizing categories and themes, I chose not to pursue a CAQDAS program as I felt it had the potential to lessen the authenticity of this project and the interview data within it. Further, the words of Pfaffenger (1988) as cited in Maxwell (2013), resonated with me:

> A technology is like a colonial power - it tells you that it is working in your best interests and, all the while it is functioning insidiously to dim your critical perception of the world around you. You will remain its victim so long as you fail to conceptualize adequately what it's up to. (p. 20)

My critical perception of the world around me, of my relationships with participants, and in my analysis of their words and shared experiences is a very important element of this research as I am the (subjective) instrument of the research. With that said, I felt that CAQDAS could serve as a distractor, or *dimmer* of that criticality as I analyzed the interview videos and transcriptions.

As I considered how to organize and accurately document the participants personal experiences (the data), I was humbly reminded of Tuck and Yang’s (2014) powerful call to name and problematize the role of settler colonialism in qualitative research. That said, allow me to name it using the powerful words and phraseology, some of which was cited earlier in this chapter, of Tuck and Yang (2014) themselves. At times, this research involved “documenting damage” (p. 226), which emerged through some of
the participants’ personal experiences with racism. Additionally, this research’s positioning of a White male researcher asking Black and Black biracial participants about the roles and impacts of other White people, had implications of a settler colonial mentality in that “it [research] relies upon western notions of power,” me as a White, male, academic researcher as the change agent who merely documents (with the potential for exploitation) the damage done to Black and Black biracial individuals, and then reports it to a predominantly White institution. This catches me in my throat as I write it and admittedly activates my white fragility, insecurity, and imposter syndrome.

Tuck and Yang (2014) go on to argue that such naive “pain-based inquiry projects,” often done by novice researchers (in this case: me), can falsely lead one to believe that this type of research is what it means to do social science research (p. 227). In a compelling and critical call to examine the role of power and positionality in research and academia, and to examine the harms that can and have been done, Tuck and Yang (2014) recalled hooks’ (1990b) unforgettable words:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (p. 243)

Clearly, I had and still have much to consider as a White male inquirer and learner, and much to be critically and suspiciously mindful of in this research and with my own thoughts and actions.

Data Analysis
Similar to how research could be better suited by being named inquiry (Dimitriadis, 2016), perhaps “findings” or “analysis” should be referred to as “interpretations.” Moreover, Seidman (2016) preferred the term “sharing the data” as opposed to “analysis” or “interpretation” (p. 128). Regardless, in this research and in my ongoing quest towards deeper individual racial consciousness, critical systemic and institutional consciousness, and efforts towards more racial equity in K-12 schooling, I acknowledge my own limitations as a White male educator doing racial equity and antiracism work. It is precisely because of this limitation and subjective lens of my own situated and contextualized positionality that I work most reliably with the words of the participants themselves, as transcribed and shared in written text to study and learn from.

In regard to data analysis, Seidman (2016) urged that “research based on in-depth interviewing is labor intensive,” and that “every moment the researcher spends paying attention to order, labels, filing, and documentation at the beginning and in the formative stages of the study can save hours of frustration later” (pp. 112-113). I acknowledged and heeded this advice carefully, and maintained a proactive and timely process of gathering and analyzing interview data and transcripts. Further, I personally transcribed the interviews myself, as I was not willing to possibly let the verbal and non-verbal details and memories of the interviews go, which would be more likely if I hired an external transcriber. Additionally, I approached the transcripts with an open mind and an open-coding inductive approach. I studied, organized, and analyzed the text while making formal and informal analytic memos and notes, and searching for connections to the research questions, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and goals of the project. I also
experimented with Seidman’s (2016) two basic ways of displaying interview data to view, analyze, and interpret it. More specifically, Seidman’s (2016) first way to display interview data is to develop profiles of individual participants and then create categories that make sense. The second approach is to mark individual passages, group them accordingly by emergent themes or categories, and then to make connections between and within them. I utilized both approaches.

Additionally, regarding the nature of analysis and interpretation of data, in The nature of interpretation in qualitative research, Peshkin (2000) argued that “Generally less consciously known to researchers, the phenomenon as named and conceived is probably associated with personal perspectives, dispositions, and feelings—in a word, their subjectivity—that also will bear on the interpretive process” (p. 6). In this research, I want to be clear that my interpretations are just that, they are my interpretations. They are not objective findings or absolute truths. Further and in his piece, Peshkin (2000) revisited previous findings of his (White, male) previously conducted research with Native American youth. In the piece, and after each section of the interpretations, Peshkin (2000) included a metanarrative which he called “problematics.” Peshkin (2000) stated that his intention was to document the researcher’s “interpretation, with its numerous occasions for interpolating and extrapolating, judgment-making and assuming, doubting and affirming” (p. 5). I think this is an important and honest construct to lean into and acknowledge the diversity, individuality, and complexity that serves as the base to all qualitative social science research/inquiry.
Furthermore, as cited in Peshkin (2000), Phillips (1996) suggested that “researchers ought to give explicit attention to the models of the phenomena that lie behind their research programs, not so that these models can be expunged but so that, like other aspects of research, they can become the objects of criticism and conscious investigation” (p. 1013). In my humble opinion, social science research, as well as qualitative research in general, should serve to both affirm and provoke - with an emphasis on provoke. To me, it is less about the “real” and “true,” or even the right and wrong, and more about the pragmatic so what? And more importantly, now what? Going back to Morgan (2014) and pragmatism, I agree that “Social science research should be judged by the range of actions that it makes possible” (p. 40).

Throughout Peshkin’s (2000) acknowledgement of his subjectivity through his stated “problematics,” he clarified his purpose: “I do this [stated problematics/subjectivity] not for the sake of confession or self-indulgence but to clarify the sources of my imagination that underpin my interpretation and, ultimately, my representation of what I learned” (p. 9). Peshkin (2000) closed with a pragmatic hope that there is a “utility” in his findings for the practice of others (p. 9). I too hope for a utility of this research in the realm of improved, informed efforts towards more racial equity in K-12 education.

In seeking to analyze, learn from, and share my interpretations from this project, I followed and responded to Seidman’s (2016) guiding questions for interview data analysis. Those questions are:

What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants they interviewed? How do they understand and explain these connections? What do
they understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts? How have their interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How have they gone beyond? (Seidman, 2016, pp. 128-129)

Throughout viewing and reviewing the interview transcripts and video recordings, I challenged myself with these questions, utilizing analytic memos as a process and tool towards deeper understanding of their importance and significance to the study and research questions.

The final stage of interpretation was my assertion of the meaning I gleaned from the process and from the participants, as outlined in chapter four and five. I strove for this research to have an audience and an impact outside of academia, and I hope that its implications reach far beyond the academic community. However, I am also aware of and cautious about naivety as a novice researcher. In the conclusion of the chapter on interview analysis, Seidman (2016) addressed this when he shared that in-depth interviewing may not be the best avenue for progressive change or reform, though it does lead towards a consciousness awareness of the role of power in social contexts and the “the issues, structures, processes, and policies that imbue participants’ stories” (p. 130).

While my main goal will be to respect and do justice to the contributions and experiences of the participants, my next goal will be to package it in a way that does merge on to the avenue for progressive, pragmatic, critical improvements in regards to K-12 efforts towards racial equity.

Validity

Maxwell (2013) defined validity as “a fairly straightforward, common sense way, to refer to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation,
interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 122). While I do not agree much with the use of the word “correctness,” which Maxwell (2013) does clarify that the aforementioned definition of validity should not be read as implying any “objective truth” (p. 122), I appreciate Maxwell’s definition of the concept of validity, as well as the use of multiple descriptors of what the interpretation/finding/shared data can be. Also, as referenced earlier in the chapter, I am aware of the subjectivity of qualitative research and the researcher as the instrument, and thus the entangled nature of addressing validity, reliability, and notions of generalizability.

Further, Lichtman (2013) outlined the evolution of the notion of validity and reliability in qualitative research. More specifically, prior to 1990, the concepts of objectivity and validity were used to assess qualitative research, though between 1990-2000, qualitative researchers shifted more towards the concepts of credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Later and post 2000, the criteria shifted again to emphasize the role of the researcher, and especially relevant in this research, the influence of power, politics, and race, all important in critical research (Lichtman, 2013).

Additionally, validity is not guaranteed by any measures, regardless of how closely one follows a certain methodology or the extent to which one faithfully uses CAQDAS software such as NVivo (Maxwell, 2013). There will undoubtedly be opportunities for alternative explanations or interpretations regarding the data shared, and there will be validity threats: or ways that the researcher could simply be wrong. More specifically, Maxwell (2013) outlined two specific validity threats. The first which has been discussed at length, is the bias of the researcher, which is inevitable and thus should
be stated not avoided. The second validity threat is reactivity. In the context of this research, reactivity would be the inevitable influence that I, the researcher/inquirer, have on the participants. There are practical things I tried to do to address this, such as avoiding leading questions. However, similar to the notion of stating my bias and positionality, in regard to reactivity, instead of trying to avoid it, I will heed to Maxwell’s (2013) advice: “what is important is to understand how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview” (p. 125). Similar to what was discussed earlier in this chapter with the framing of interpretations and problematics (Peshkin, 2000), I strived to do this both frequently and transparently.

Finally, there are specific ways to examine and address validity threats and thus increase the potential credibility of eventual interpretations. In the spirit of bricolage, I chose relevant validity strategies from three sets of strategies from Maxwell (2013), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Creswell and Creswell (2018). Below is a brief overview of six ways I plan to address validity threats in this research.

First and very important to me as a researcher/inquirer, I utilized member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018), sometimes also called respondent validation (Maxwell, 2016) with the participants. I strove to do this in the interviews with questions like “did I hear you correctly?” as well as through more in-depth member checks. More specifically, I shared a draft of chapter four with the participants with an optional opportunity to review what I wrote about and cited from their interviews and my interpretations, and offered to connect if they were interested.
Second, I strove for rich data (Maxwell, 2013), or rich-thick descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). By collecting and transcribing all the interviews personally, as well as reviewing my notes and analytic memos to contextualize the study and participants, I strove to provide rich and descriptive detail grounding both the study and my interpretations in chapters four and five. Third, and as mentioned previously, I openly clarified my own bias and positionality, to both the project participants and any readers of this work. I will continue to do this in future work in an effort towards more critical self-reflection on my own assumptions and worldview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), as well as to create an open and honest account about how my interpretations are inevitably shaped by my unique positionality (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018). Fourth, I used peer debriefing (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) by working with and alongside my committee members and their critical questions and suggestions about this project, my biases and assumptions, and flaws in the logic or methods as they were presented. Fifth, I presented evidence from the participants’ interviews even when it was contrasting or discrepant to other participants’ ideas in an effort to allow the reader access to the data to draw their own conclusions (Maxwell, 2013; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). An example of this can be found in chapter four when two participants have very different ideas about the use of more direct, racialized language and its benefits and burdens.

Finally, I strove to limit qualitative generalization and generalized claims about groups (e.g. Black and Black biracial educators, White educators) to which the results cannot and should not be generalized (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Further, Cresswell
and Cresswell (2018) argued that “The value of qualitative research lies in the particular description and themes developed in the context of a specific site” (p. 202). As stated earlier, in this research, I attempted to take into account the many contextual influences at play for participants, including but not limited to their race, school/district demographics, the composition of their school, community, and district, and the local history in which their school community was situated. However, through all these efforts towards avoiding qualitative generalization, I also address warranted assertions and beliefs based on respondent trends and patterns, and acknowledge my own experiences, values, and positionality and how they shaped the research and assertions. This was all done in a pragmatic effort to share useful knowledge that may have implications for others (Morgan, 2007), and that potentially can be used to guide present and future behavior towards more informed and improved racial equity efforts in K-12.

In conclusion, by sharing this “checklist” of six validity threats, I am reminded of what Maxwell (2013) cautioned in regards to research proposals and validity: “Keep in mind that these strategies work only if you actually use them. Putting them in your [dissertation] proposal as though they were magic spells that could drive away the validity threats won't do the job” (p. 125). In the hopes of sharing meaningful data and interpretations, lessons learned, and raising more important questions for further research on racial equity efforts in K-12, I humbly invite you to read and critique this research. In the process of continuing to build this learning forward, I plan to continue to be critical of my own perspective, to regularly compare and contrast my findings/interpretations with past and present literature and theories, and to trust the words and lived experiences of
the project participants in helping to illuminate the path towards a more informed, improved approach to school-based racial equity work in K-12 settings across the U.S.

**Summary of the Methodology and Application to the Study**

This research is based upon the methodological choice and approach of bricolage, which is an intentionally customized and reflexive approach. In this chapter, I outline my use of elements of critical qualitative research and interview. Additionally, I address many personal, practical, and intellectual goals in the exploration of the roles and impacts of White majoritarian educators in school-based racial equity work. My methodological choices are also strongly influenced by critical race methodology in educational research, which explicitly addresses race and racism, and prioritizes counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). That said, in this research I center the personal and lived experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educator participants that were selected through a modified version of snowball sampling. I utilize a variety of coding methods and analytic memos, and I apply six validity measures to ensure the highest possible credibility of the eventual interpretations. (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Meet the Participants

This section introduces the seven project participants through vignettes that I hope highlight their humanity, unicity, and brilliance, as both individuals and educators. While these vignettes may bend or stretch the traditional genre of academic and dissertation writing, even in qualitative interview research projects such as this, I draw from Kinloch and San Pedro’s (2014) notion of the descriptive, evocative “reflexive vignette” (p. 22) which prioritizes engaging with and not on or about participants as way to learn from and collaborate with the participants while also centering their unique experiences and voices.

I have also intentionally chosen to prioritize the use of both rich, thick descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and humanizing approaches (Paris & Winn, 2014). More specifically, rich and thick descriptions being “highly descriptive, detailed” accounts of the participants’ experiences, mainly illustrated through their own words as they were shared with me; the lead listener, learner, and author. Additionally, I draw from humanizing approaches (Paris & Winn, 2014) that explore the “interconnected terrain” (p. xiv) of witnessing, worthiness, vulnerability, and hopes for positive social change that emerge with/in and across this research and the ensuing relationship building process that took place throughout the process. Therefore, these seven reflexive vignettes, as well the entire fourth chapter in general, are the length and depth they are in an effort to honor and prioritize and detail the humanity, authenticity, and genius of the seven project participants as shared through their experiences, ideas, and own words.
Ultimately, the heart and soul of this chapter, really of this project, is in the actual words, stories, and lived experiences of the seven participants. While reading this chapter, I invite the reader to consider: what do you hear Mr. Brill, Ms. Molkera, Ms. Reed, Ms. Alexander, Mr. James, Ms. Free, and Mr. Douglass saying? How do their ideas and experiences influence and land with you? How can their ideas and experiences perhaps help you learn, grow, and lead towards more racial equity in K-12 education? Finally, after learning with and from these brilliant educators and people, what seems more possible? And what’s next?

**Mr. Brill: Participant #1**

Mr. Brill was the first project participant I interviewed and he blew me away with his thoughtful ideas and both visionary and pragmatic disposition. He opened by sharing that he had never been formally interviewed before, and it quickly became clear to me that he had thought through the interview questions and came ready to go with lots of important and powerful ideas and reflections. He thought deeply and explained his ideas clearly, smiled often, and was keenly engaged and ambitious with what he believed public education should and could be. After rewatching my interviews with Mr. Brill, I realized how often we both would connect interview questions to personal stories that would lead us into complex and nuanced tangents and ideas. In our first interview alone, there were at least four times in the final thirty minutes where one of us said something along the lines of, “Ok, I swear this is the last thing I’m going to bring up for today, but…” which was usually followed by the other person laughing, and then leaning in to listen and consider.
Mr. Brill identifies as Black biracial and grew up on the East Coast in what he described as “a very White colorblind community” with all White teachers. He has taught both middle and high school in a couple different regions across the U.S. He is a passionate, bright, and dedicated educator with multiple graduate degrees. Right away, it became clear to me that Mr. Brill always put his students first, and that he is not afraid to invite students to see, name, critique, and analyze the historical and socio-political reality of our contentious times. Mr. Brill described his time teaching with a predominantly Latino/a/x student population as an eye-opening experience that was much different than his predominantly White northeastern upbringing. Mr. Brill shared:

That was the first time [teaching in a different part of the U.S.] where I was aware of how much [racial] representation really mattered and the power of that. You know, I had students in my class who were behavior nightmares for their other teachers who were not teachers of Color… but they just had a connection to me because I looked like them and I had similar lived experiences, and that really opened my eyes to the advocacy work that I realized that I wanted to do.

Upon coming to the Pacific Northwest, Mr. Brill noticed another shift in racial demographics, with both his colleagues and students. He shared, “It was very obvious to me there were districts [in the Pacific Northwest] like straight up who were very honest, like hey, you're a teacher of Color, we don't have any of those. Would you like to come teach for us?” he laughed. Beyond the humor, however, Mr. Brill described the very real challenges of feeling like he had to leave part of his identity behind in working in predominantly White spaces. He explained:

Like I'm walking into this White space, this very, very White space, and I'm having to leave part of my identity at the door. And I felt that most with my interactions with my students, like I can't be my full self because of this institution that is predominantly White and now my students aren't getting the most out of
me because I feel like I'm not able to truly be myself, and express myself the way that I need to be able to.

Mr. Brill went on to describe why he wears a shirt and tie every day, even during the stretch of remote virtual learning when he taught from home. He explained:

There might not be a lot of people of Color in their [predominantly White students’] lives, so, I feel as though I have to live up to this, like, model minority for right or for wrong. Like these White kids... I don't know how much diversity is in their lives, so I want to make sure that the few interactions they have with a person of Color are positive ones.

Finally, Mr. Brill shared that in his current predominantly White school district in the Pacific Northwest, he often felt that his experiences, especially racialized experiences, were not being heard nor legitimized. “It very much felt like I was speaking into the dark,” he nodded his head. “And that's what pushed me to pursue this [additional graduate degree] more than anything else. It was like I need these letters at the end of my name so people would listen to what I have to say.”

Ms. Molkera: Participant #2

Ms. Molkera is full of positive and warm energy, humor, and loved talking about everything education, whether it was teachers, curriculum, students, building coalitions with like-minded educators, racial equity work – all of it. Ms. Molkera identifies as Black and was born into a family of educators and lovers of literature. She grew up surrounded by school administrators, English majors, and Ms. Molkera knew her calling to the classroom when she taught her little brother how to read. Ms. Molkera smiled and shared, “So I spent most of my life teaching my little brother and I love talking about the stories… I love literature so much. Love engaging dialogue with the students and I don't ever wanna lose that piece.” Ms. Molkera has spent her entire teaching career teaching
high school in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest, and that came with many racialized experiences. For example, Ms. Molkera shared a personal story about a rude and wide (read: White) awakening of being one of the lone Black teachers in the region.

Ms. Molkera shared:

So many things that were so, gosh, so white [emphasis added]. I went to my first teacher meeting [at another school] and the principal that was leaving came to me. She's like, ‘Oh, are you the new custodian?’ I was like, what? Cause they just hired a Black custodian… She goes, ‘Oh, you’re not a custodian?’ And I said no. I'm a teacher. And I go, who are you? That was my first introduction [to the new school district]. Oh my lord Jesus.

Ms. Molkera went on to describe some of her work specifically in the realm of racial equity. Throughout her career she served on several regional equity teams and has personally started countless student leadership groups including Black Student Unions (BSU) and after-school clubs. “I’m a BSU Avenger, I really do believe that,” she smiled and proudly proclaimed. Ms. Molkera also organized what she called “diversity assemblies” and created her school’s first African-American literature class. She beamed with pride recalling the memory of her early days in the African-American literature classes: “And then the class grew to five sections. It grew and it grew,” she said quietly with a humble smile. She also found her calling in doing both formal and informal consultation with other schools and districts to get BSUs and Black student leadership opportunities up and running. “I was like Johnny Appleseed, the OG [original gangster]” she laughed.

However, there were also times throughout our connections that Ms. Molkera took deep breaths and appeared visibly pained when recalling some of her memories and racialized experiences. For instance, Ms. Molkera told me about a racial affinity meeting
where she went to connect with other teachers of Color who also experienced what she described as “being the only one” [person of Color] in their region. She shared:

We went to a meeting, there was a counselor...The room is full of minority administrators and teachers and half of them were in tears before the night was over and we're talking about what it was like being the only one of our kind and trying to do the work. There's a sense of isolation that exists.

Ms. Molkera shared many of her personal experiences with me, as well as some instances where she perceived the operation of racism and a sense of racial isolation and othering, and while I won’t be sharing those experiences specifically, they clearly played a big role in her personal and professional life. In one instance, Ms. Molkera shared, “I’m not an angry Black woman. I'm always Ms. Quiet Mouse, I look braver than I am.” Later in our interviews, she elaborated:

I wear rose colored glasses... I don't look for racism, it's just always there and I'm always last to see it because I don't like to use the race card, but the reality is, there's a lot of racism that I just didn't tap into... To go to work, every day, knowing that you're going to war and you're fighting, it was exhausting.

**Ms. Reed: Participant #3**

I will never forget Ms. Reed. Her passion and honesty, her skill for storytelling, her deeply contagious love for her students and their education, it was all so potent and vivid in the way she described her experiences and ideas. The first time we talked on the phone, Ms. Reed asked me to give her my “elevator speech” for this project, and I remember that moment like it was yesterday. Funny enough, back in one of my doctoral classes we literally had an assignment where we were asked to deliver an “elevator speech” of our dissertation proposal, so technically I should have been ready for this. However, in that moment I remember pacing in my house nervously, partially searching
for better cell phone reception, partially quelling some nervous energy. My two-year-old daughter, as if sensing something, began to cry loudly, and trailed me around the house, attempting to hug my leg between each step. After I finished the elevator speech on the aims of this project, there were a few seconds of silence, and then Ms. Reed quietly asked me, “Can I push back on you? This is about being real, right?” What followed was a powerful, unforgettable moment where she challenged and invited me not to be so “academic,” and so “intellectual” regarding race and racial equity. We closed the conversation that day with plans to connect again via Zoom before she formally agreed to be part of the project. “I need to look into your eyes first,” she told me. She wanted to see if I was worthy.

Ms. Reed identifies as Black and grew up in the South. She has taught all over the world and across the country ranging from high school to elementary school, and has held multiple jobs outside of education including in juvenile justice. Ms. Reed shared:

I think there's also a mindset that's a little bit different if you only know this one hustle [referring to teaching]. I definitely don't feel a part of the teacher’s sorority fraternity thing that I see existing. I don't follow any herd blindly. But honey, my lived experiences have taught me a thing or two.

Ms. Reed is an incredible storyteller and speaks with both conviction and a spontaneous literary acumen. There were several times Ms. Reed seemed to make up metaphors on the spot, and those metaphors were some of my most memorable recollections of our conversations. Whether telling stories of her childhood or her everyday realities, when she spoke, everything seemed to stop. I could just imagine how much her students must love reading and learning with her. Ms. Reed shared memorable experiences of her childhood church days, including an influential choir director who challenged her to be a
better thinker and reader. She also recalled her experiences being bused to “the White high school” because she passed “the test.” She explained:

We [Black students] took a lot. We got taught how to Jackie Robinson. We got explicitly taught how to literally smile and turn the other cheek because our fight and comeback was gonna be in performance and success. We were expected to make it because of this experience that we were getting and it was so hard.

Ms. Reed did make it, and she found herself early in her adult life wanting to teach high school to give back some of what she had learned to love so much - her passion and talent for reading and literature. “I wanted to teach at a high school that was similar to the high school that I was supposed [emphasis added] to go to, which was very inner city... predominantly Black.” She expanded on her love of literature, and how she saw literacy as a superpower and tool towards achieving social justice. “Literacy is such a big part of my life… what do they say, let your pedagogy be your protest. That is my part in social justice. I don't always get out and march, I do sometimes,” she pondered, “but I'm going to make my class literate.”

Ms. Reed also shared a powerful, emotional story about how she left the teaching profession, only to return later on in her life, after one of her high school students was murdered. She described him with tears welling in her eyes, “he could rival the smartest we have,” she reflected in a quiet whisper. “He got murdered, and I just realized I'm not Jaime Escalante. I'm not a Dangerous Minds [referring to the films]. This work isn't meant for me. I couldn’t.” Ms. Reed then began to work in juvenile justice, as a trained attorney, but then she began to realize something stirring inside of her.

I felt like I was too late [working with adolescents]. I was dealing with babies that were already at that place where I couldn't feel the return, and I'm not saying anybody is beyond redemption... So I went back.
Ms. Reed later added, “But to teach in America is an interesting beast,” she shared knowingly.

**Ms. Alexander: Participant #4**

Ms. Alexander was such a natural when it came to talking about teaching, education, and educational leadership. She has a genuine and humble confidence paired with a witty sense of humor that makes talking with her such a joy and inspiration. Ms. Alexander also has a very creative and pragmatic way of describing both the challenges and opportunities that she sees in education today. I immediately could imagine what an incredible teacher and leader she was.

Ms. Alexander was recruited to become a teacher by others that witnessed her gift for working with children. “My mother has always worked with kids,” she shared, “she was the director of the kid’s choir at my church and she operated the daycare out of the house, and so it was kind of intuitive for me.” Ms. Alexander grew up in the Pacific Northwest and described herself as a “quick-witted, Black, female, no-nonsense teacher.” Ms. Alexander was also clear that her strength and success in the classroom did not come from her racial identity, nor did she feel that anyone’s strength or success could or would come from their race. Instead, Ms. Alexander shared, “It [strength and success in the classroom] comes from the way we treat, and what we expect from kids and families.”

In addition to being a teacher, Ms. Alexander has also served as an instructional coach and in school administration. She described herself and her career trajectory by saying, “I’m the type of person, I’m just gonna put it out there and see where it goes. And so I’ve done that.” I quickly realized that Ms. Alexander and I both shared a lot of
professional positions and even grade-levels and content areas that we taught, and I immediately felt a deeper sense of connection with her. Interestingly enough, Ms. Alexander was also the only project participant that was recruited by two different critical mentors of mine, meaning that we had mutual connections in multiple ways. It felt like it was just the right time for our paths to cross, and I am grateful and better as a result of our connections.

Ms. Alexander is also a phenomenal writer and storyteller. She shared some of her work with me, and in her written words, I could feel her heart and see how she so eloquently described the visionary possibility of a more racially just educational experience for both students and teachers of Color. Ms. Alexander has a way with words that beautifully weaves in both creativity and criticality. I especially recall a powerful piece she wrote on being a teacher of Color in a predominantly White space, and her use of vivid and creative metaphors to describe the brutal and collaborative impact that both racism and fear from White colleagues had on students and teachers of Color. Ultimately, Ms. Alexander was clear in her stances on race and education that educators, especially White ones, would benefit from directly confronting their racialized discomfort, by examining their own practice and being, and committing to change, and I agree with her wholeheartedly.

Throughout our time together, I consistently found myself wishing I had the opportunity to teach, learn, and grow alongside Ms. Alexander. I was amazed at how she shared both provocative and practical ideas so authentically, so effortlessly as if the
answer was so obvious and so obviously attainable, that it was just simply time to stop talking and get to work.

Mr. James: Participant #5

Mr. James has a unique, approachable, friendly, and honest way about him. Throughout our conversations his sense of authenticity shined, as did his ability to invite reflection and action. “I'll be like, like raw honest with you,” he told me as we started the first interview, and I believed him and shared the same. Our connection on a personal level felt almost instant, and before we knew it, we were sharing stories of our childhoods, our families, and our work lives and ambitions. As we got into more professional and educational topics, it felt no different.

Teaching was always an attractive option for the young Mr. James. From a young age he had worked in after-school programs and always got along well with kids. He explained:

For me at the time, I grew up in like fairly abject poverty, so it [teaching] was a lock to escape... Like in my head I was like, man... I don't know of teachers who are on food stamps and I can do what Mr. Jones down the hall does, and I could probably do it better.

Mr. James went on to share about his own rising critical consciousness when he began taking classes in a college of education, and how that helped shape his path and professional calling. “My moral consciousness was really being formed by a lot of the ethnic studies classes I was taking, so I started thinking to myself, how can I apply these things to my life in my life's work?” he recalled.

Mr. James’s teaching career started in a large, urban, inner-city school on the West Coast. “You know it [his first teaching job] was 50% unfilled, meaning like they
couldn't keep teachers there. So all the kids had substitutes all day,” he shared as he shook his head. “I got really good chops 'cause nobody's gonna save you. There's no principal. There's no coach… That gave me some street credit, too.” Mr. James had a natural, humble confidence and a visionary drive. He went on, “I put everything into it [my job]. And then from there I became a department head and I just kind of kept seizing opportunities.” Mr. James has also worked in a variety of administrative positions. “I kind of got this reputation as being kind of Mr. Fix-It with climate, culture, and community. And all during this time too, I was always wondering, like, what can I do to get better?” This drive, as well as his charismatic, natural, and engaging leadership and presence have undoubtedly had an incredible impact on many. Mr. James added that growing as a teacher, administrator, and leader was never easy, and that being a Black man made everything that much more challenging and at times lonely, but he always seemed to perceive challenges as opportunities. Mr. James shared:

And I represent a very un-ideal profile for a leader, and that's still a problem [in the Pacific Northwest], but you know I have zero contemporaries. Like there's no other Black males… doing this work, there was maybe one, two others, out of hundreds. So it's just me, you know? And that's also afforded me the opportunity to be a representative from my community.

As stated earlier, Black teachers represent 7% of the teaching force in U.S. public education, with Black males representing a mere 2% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Throughout our conversations, Mr. James openly shared who he was, what he believed and why, where he had been, and where he wanted to see education go. I felt incredibly lucky to be able to connect and learn with and from Mr. James.
Ms. Free: Participant #6

In one of my first Zoom meetings with Ms. Free, I got a unique opportunity to see her interact with her child, and it was just special. The love, the respect, the warmth, it was all as clear as day. “I can tell you’re like the coolest Mom,” I shared, to which she laughed and replied, “Yeah, they’re cool kids, too.” Right off the bat, Ms. Free modeled what I see some of the most extraordinary teachers do all the time - when you compliment them (teachers), they redirect the compliment to their students immediately.

Once Ms. Free started describing her life’s work in education, the love, respect, warmth, as well as her strategic vision for better; it was all as clear as day, too.

Ms. Free identifies as Black biracial and grew up in the Midwest and West Coast with a deep lineage of educators in her immediate family. “My most important role models were educators,” she proudly shared. Ms. Free went on to share how at one point both her parents lost their jobs in education. “They [my parents] weren't renewed, racism shaped my parents’ experience... And so understanding the barriers that existed because of racism is what led me to become an educator,” she explained.

Ms. Free shared that in her opinion, teachers were really civil rights activists. She smiled, “I witnessed that [spirit of activism] from the womb, I guess.” She went on to share, “Just growing up committed to social justice and civil rights, understanding deeply the barriers for equity, you know, for students, their various identities in school” she pondered, “I mean, that's just, I lived with that. I lived with those conversations every day in my home.” As I listened to Ms. Free, I imagined a young and curious Ms. Free, constantly wondering and learning, soaking up those powerful conversations with her
family, thinking about the difference she would one day plan to make, the path she would one day blaze for herself and her future students and children. Ms. Free also shared that growing up she witnessed lots of anti-Blackness and racism, including against family and close community members, and that both deeply impacted her and reinforced her desire to become an educator.

To Ms. Free, teaching is an avenue to change the world; it always has been, and it continues to provide opportunities to learn and act for more justice. She explained:

You know, I think that teaching is a way to embody justice. Or it can be, right? It just seems like such a direct way to interact with humans and effect change… I've always had, you know, just that transformative, like kind of mission. Education was always about disrupting patterns of inequity, a mechanism for liberation.

The more we talked, the more Ms. Free reflected on and recalled some of her favorite classroom memories, and some of her favorite teaching partners and projects with students. I feel like you can tell when someone genuinely loves their students and loves the opportunities that being a teacher affords, and that was certainly the case with Ms. Free. She openly shared times when she felt inspired by her students but simultaneously ignored and avoided by some in positions of professional and institutional power. For instance, Ms. Free recalled times when she felt let down and unsupported by both the system and some colleagues that didn’t seem ready or interested in those same changes and vision for what educational justice can and should be.

Ms. Free has taught and inspired lots of powerful work across the Pacific Northwest in many areas, including (but not limited to) culturally responsive teaching, ethnic studies, as well as local Indigenous tribal history, and she’s not stopping anytime soon. As if reflecting on her lifetime of personal and professional work and still plotting
out its future path, Ms. Free excitedly shared that she felt racial equity and social justice work was beginning to reach even the “unlikely places.” Ms. Free explained:

It is a really exciting time to be doing this work because you can see, right, that the seeds are being watered and starting to flourish a little bit… The pattern is being woven and you're in it, but you can't see it yet.

And yet while she was excited and focused, she was simultaneously grounded in both reality and history. She cautiously shared:

The more visible we are [doing racial equity and social justice work], the more we expand our reach, the more pushback. Yeah, you know, I just keep remembering that, like if we are not creating those ripples, then we're not doing it right.

Mr. Douglass: Participant #7

Mr. Douglass’s kindness, humility, and strategic focus were so clear in our conversations. He described personal and professional experiences with both curiosity and criticality, never with judgment, and offered his experiences as provocations for continued growth, learning, and improvement. I could tell that his work and school community was so much more to him than a job, that his students were like his own children, and he exhibited such warmth and care, along with both a vision and appetite for ongoing change and improvement.

In our first conversation, Mr. Douglass kindly asked that our interviews were over the phone and not recorded. He was comfortable with participating in interviews and with me taking informal notes while we talked, though he shared that as a Black biracial male educator, it was easy for him to be personally identified in his specific community, and therefore his participation was a risk to both himself and his livelihood. I tried my best to explain to Mr. Douglass that I understood, as much as I felt I could understand as a White
person of much racial and intersectional privilege, and that I was honored and grateful that he was willing to share his time, energy, trust, and experiences with me.

Throughout our phone conversations, Mr. Douglass was very easy to talk to and learn from. He answered questions directly and clearly, and often was thinking about and prioritizing his students and community in everything he did. He was a champion for the real work of doing, not just talking about doing. And I deeply respected that. Throughout the project, Mr. Douglass’s ideas and experiences will not be quoted directly, but instead summarized based on my informal notes of our conversations in an effort to capture his ideas and visions for K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. Thinking about Mr. Douglass’s request to not be recorded made me confront and acknowledge a durable truth and very real risk that hovered beneath this entire project.

**An Acknowledgment of Risk**

The truth is that the seven Black and Black biracial participants in this project, including Mr. Douglass, risked a lot by being part of this project. At the time I was conducting these interviews, especially throughout my connections with Mr. Douglass, there was a local Pacific Northwestern school district that made the national news after a virtual district-wide professional development session on antiracism and racial equity was leaked to national news outlets. More specifically, there was a district professional development meeting via Zoom that was streamed on YouTube that featured a group of primarily educators of Color participating in a virtual fishbowl discussion activity. I personally knew some of the educators in the video. In the fishbowl discussion, the participants talked about antiracism work in education and their personal and professional
experiences. The video was leaked and shared with national news networks who then shared the video in online articles and on television. Some of the educators of Color in the video were identified by their full names, school district, and even specific teaching assignments, which led to some of them becoming recipients of hateful and hurtful messages from critics across the country.

Sitting with this racial and racist reality, and with my own racial privilege and personal sense of responsibility in racial equity work, this historically glaring double standard had never seemed clearer. No White teachers were targeted nor harmed in the previously described experience, and there were White educators featured in the video as well. The targets were the brave educators of Color who took the risk of speaking up and sharing their truth. As cited in chapter two, I once read that “White allies take up space, and White accomplices take risks.” I can’t attribute the quote to a specific source other than educators across online platforms like Twitter and the like, but the sentiment often finds its way into my mind regarding school racial equity work, especially in predominantly White spaces. What is, if any, my personal and professional risk in facilitating this project? Am I just taking up space myself? And most importantly, what will be the reward for project participants who took the real risk in participating in this project, in trusting me, a White person on a Zoom or phone call?

Additionally, and very importantly, many of the ideas that the participants shared about what racial equity work is and isn’t, how its intentions and impacts can differ, and how their experiences as Black and Black biracial educators is often significantly different than their White colleagues’ experiences, were rich, and complex, and unique to
them and their individual experiences. Before we explore some of their ideas and experiences, I believe it is important to again situate this project and clarify what it is and what it isn’t.

**What this project is and isn’t.**

This project is *not* intended to paint a broad stroke of the Black or Black biracial educator experience in the Pacific Northwest. First, as a White person, I wouldn’t be the right author to even attempt that, nor would such generalization be possible. Perhaps this project will do the opposite, as the reader will see that each participants’ lived and professional experiences were their own and were nuanced and unique in their own way. Certainly there were times that some of the participants’ personal or professional experiences and ideas seemed to overlap and intersect, but there were also times when ideas and beliefs differed and contrasted. Further, the project participants’ experiences highlight how they not only uniquely navigate the predominantly White space of K-12 in the Pacific Northwest every day, but also a unique reflectiveness of the real complexity and nuance to racial equity work, which included challenging the notion of racial generalization. For instance, Mr. Brill shared:

*We want to bring teachers of Color to the table [with racial equity work], but tokenism is a real thing, right? Like we know that’s a real thing and so is essentialism. So just because I speak on my experiences right doesn't mean I represent every other Black educator as few or far between as they may be. You know, I come from a very different experience, especially because I am Black biracial. You know, I can speak more easily into certain spaces that other people of Color can’t. So my experience is atypical.*

Honestly, is there any “typical,” racial experience for Black, White, or biracial educators?

Being White and considering other White educators I have worked with across my years
in public education, I would resoundingly say no. Additionally, when reflecting on some of the nuances of racial equity work and of being Black, Ms. Alexander shared, “Number one: Black people are not monolithic. We don't do all the same things. We don't.” Ms. Reed also shared the problematic nature of generalizing racial groups, including with commonly used terminology like saying “people of Color.” Ms. Reed explained, “Even saying like people of Color, you assume that there's like some unity in the community. Know we’re all pitted against each other. Same way all White people don't get along,” she cautioned.

This is all to say that I invite the reader to actively look for and be reflective about the complexities and subtle uniqities of both racial equity work and racialized experiences in K-12 public education in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest. In this project, those complexities and uniqities are framed through the individual and collective experiences of the seven participants’ experiences, as they were shared with me. As a White educator, person, listener, and writer who is hoping to do more than take up space in the movement to reimagine and rebuild more racially equitable schools and systems of education, I hope that my White frame and lens can help illuminate some of the nuanced complexities and opportunities to grow, evolve, and transform our predominantly White systems and institutions into more racially equitable ones that all of our students and educators, especially our students and teachers of Color, deserve.

**Overview and Emergent Themes**

In the opening section, titled “Racial Equity in K-12 means many things to many people,” I explore the variance, similarity, and nuance that exists within and across all
seven participants’ living definitions of racial equity as well as some of their satisfactions and dissatisfactions regarding racial equity work in predominantly White K-12 settings in the Pacific Northwest. I describe a variety of ideas that the participants shared that help illustrate that racial equity in K-12 meant many different things to the participants. Following this introduction and grounding, I organize this chapter by three themes that emerged from the interviews and collaborative conversations with the seven project participants.

The first theme is “Hierarchies: Institutional presence and precedence in K-12 racial equity work.” This theme highlights the participants’ experiences with racial equity work in K-12 settings with an emphasis on their experiences with district and building leadership, institutional practices, and the notion of responsibility and accountability in racial equity work.

The second theme is “Living, learning, and leading in historical times: The movement for Black lives and justice and COVID-19’s impact on K-12 racial equity work.” This theme explores the varying roles and impacts of the movement for Black lives and justice and the COVID-19 pandemic on both racial equity work in the participants’ schools and districts, as well as their own personal and professional experiences.

The third and final theme is “The many (white) elephants in the (class)room: The perceived and varying roles, impacts, and potential of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.” This theme covers a central aspect of this project, which is an intentional and critical look at the roles and impacts of majoritarian
White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, as shared by the project participants.

*Racial Equity in K-12 Means Many Things to Many People*

In this section, I highlight the participants’ living definitions of racial equity along with some of their satisfactions and dissatisfactions regarding racial equity work in predominantly White K-12 settings in the Pacific Northwest.

*How do you define racial equity in K-12?* Admittedly, I was a bit hesitant asking the participants how they would personally define racial equity work in the context of K-12 education and schooling because I acknowledge that racial equity could mean many different things in many different ways. I also acknowledge that work regarding race and racism can be very personal, and at times traumatic, for educators of Color in predominantly White spaces and institutions. However, I still felt it was important to begin with a working, nuanced recognition, if not necessarily a definition, of how the participants conceptualized racial equity work in K-12 schooling before launching into more complex topics and ideas. And so we began.

For the sake and ease of the reader, and to improve the accessibility of the participants’ unique and powerfully layered ideas and experiences, there are times when I will use tables to illustrate what I perceived as main ideas in the participants’ answers to specific questions. For example, please see below for both the question and summaries of the participants’ ideas (Table 2). Following each table, I use direct quotes from the participants to more deeply expand on the ideas and experiences shared.

*Table 2*

*Personal Definitions of School-Based Racial Equity*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>Student-level: decision making process that uses the lens of the most marginalized student. Teacher-level: ensuring that there is a space and resources/support for teachers of Color.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>Racial and ethnic representation in curriculum and having more teachers of Color and teacher support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>High expectations, strong pedagogy and training, and love, especially for teachers working in schools serving students facing the most barriers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Alexander</td>
<td>When race is no longer an indicator or predictor of student achievement or belonging, nor linked to staff burnout and conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Knowing, including, and honoring the broad backgrounds of students and communities of Color; and learning about racist power structures and deconstructing them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Free</td>
<td>Dismantling the historical structure that has sustained white supremacy by “examining” and “rigorously” dismantling things that do not reflect the values of the communities that we serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Douglass</td>
<td>A journey of learning and action that includes historical understanding and a systematic approach to improving racialized outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* How would you personally define racial equity in the context of K-12 education and schooling?

After I asked Ms. Reed how she would define racial equity in K-12, she looked away for a few seconds, then looked back at me. “That’s a really overbroad question, because every school is different,” she shared. Ms. Molkera had a similar initial response, as she initially furrowed her brow and replied, “That's such a… [pauses] it's such a big question.” I shifted in my seat a bit, knowing that the question was indeed too broad, but then we began to get into some rich ideas, really with all seven participants, and I began to see some of the both unique and intersecting ideas emerging. While some participants saw racial equity as more of a process, or a mindset that lived and evolved with both thinking and action, others saw racial equity as almost a reimagined reality, or a
conceptual place itself, that included a different and more responsive schooling experience.

For example, when I asked Ms. Molkera about how she would define racial equity in K-12, after initially pondering the question, she got very specific: it was about curriculum and representation. Ms. Molkera shared that every school should have multicultural literature and history classes, an ethnic studies class, and a building leader who is responsible and equipped with the skills and knowledge to help lead, share, validate, and coach teachers and hold them accountable in their curricular choices and how things are being taught. Further, Ms. Molkera shared a memory of when she proposed the creation of a new high school African-American literature class earlier in her career: “The principal said, Ms. Molkera, we only have 10 Black kids here, no one’s gonna want that class. That was the response. I was just like, jaw drop,” she shook her head. Ms. Molkera then added, “Fast forward to five sections of 30 kids dying to be in that class,” she smiled.

In terms of defining racial equity in K-12, Ms. Molkera went on to share that having more teachers of Color and a more racially representative teaching force was also foundational to racial equity in K-12. As she was thinking back to her years teaching in the classroom, she pondered and recalled, “How many people have said to me, all ages, I never had a Black teacher…And the kids are dying to see a Black person in the building... Every space I go to, and Latino and Asian students too,” she explained. “The state really needs to put money aside, if you want to hire people of Color that are quality, and put little pressure on districts to do it as well.”
Ms. Alexander was perhaps the most direct about what racial equity meant to her in K-12, and readily answered the question as if she had done so many times before:

Racial equity is when race is no longer an indicator or predictor of student achievement or student belonging. Race is no longer a predictor of parental involvement. Race is no longer a predictor of students’ social emotional support and sense of belonging in a school. And staff, too. Race is no longer a predictor of staff burnout. Staff conflict.

I perceived Ms. Alexander’s description of racial equity as a reimagined reality with a reduced relevance of race in predicting and determining outcomes, for both students and teachers of Color.

Ms. Reed, in a similar vein, described racial equity as a reimagined schooling experience, with phenomenal teachers and great expectations at the center, which she believed would lead to more racially equitable student outcomes and experiences. The reader may recall from Ms. Reed’s vignette that she loved literature and was very passionate in how she described things. For many of her ideas and answers, she would use creative and at times humorous phraseology and metaphors. In this instance and in regard to racial equity, Ms. Reed wanted a new standard for all educators, based on sky-high expectations, strong pedagogy and teacher training, and love; especially for those educators working in schools serving students who faced more barriers. Ms. Reed shared her thoughts on racial equity in K-12:

You know the same way that there is a medical malpractice standard, right? There needs to be an educational malfeasance, below here and then the standard. And it's not a standard that's just tied to Common Core or test scores. If this is what's typical worldwide and then regionally in America and then in the Pacific Northwest [referring to racial inequity in schools]... then there needs to be some really high expectations… and we need to really train teachers so that teachers are equipped. You know, you think about another profession where the measurement [of success] isn't human, that you could be like year after year, ’man, these kids
are hard, they can't read, it's their fault.’ Could you do that at Google?! Bye bye! Never!

Ms. Reed’s notion of medical malfeasance made me think of how Dillard (2022) argued that teachers of Black students should, like doctors, take a Hippocratic oath to “do no harm” by being both reflective and responsible.

After sharing a couple ways she sets high expectations for her class community, Ms. Reed modeled how she spoke to her students, which was always a treat for me to observe. Each time she did this, I would think: First, how can I get my children in her class one day? And second, Ms. Reed seemed to embody what has been characterized in education as the “warm demander” (Kleinfeld, 1975). For example, Ms. Reed explained:

I love my babies, but mind you, when I say love I need to really make sure I define it. I am strict… I really establish a ‘We mentality’ ’cause it's OK to be sad. It's OK to be mad, it's OK and beautiful to feel, right? And I love you so much that you can be in this brave space where life things happen and it’s hard, and it's awful. And we’re equipped with the mentality to overcome them and that's what I'm gonna give you.

Shortly thereafter, Ms. Reed went on to specifically describe uninspired pedagogy and teaching through a powerful metaphor likening it to bland food, and the need for “seasoning,” especially in places where students deserve the absolute best. She shared:

You know it's easy for us [teachers] to sit and complain. You think it's [seeking more racial equity] hard? I choose to work at title schools… and I think that title [schools] deserves to have the best [emphasis added]. Title should have teachers that are amazing. They should have some seasoning. They should know some tricks; they should be open and willing to better practices. And that's the problem. We're not willing to have that courageous conversation. We already know we can't talk about race, but what about this? I love you. I see you. I want you to be here. But let's get something straight. Poor kids? Kids of Color? We're used to eating good food, so if you come with some kind of bland meal that tastes like yuck, you just threw it together for us? We know [emphasis added].
To Ms. Reed, powerful and dynamic teaching was the engine towards achieving more racial equity in education, and that placed teachers at the center as well. Ms. Reed got me thinking about Gloria Ladson-Billings, and two of her foundational works. First, Ladson-Billings’ characterization of culturally relevant pedagogy as “just good teaching!” (1995b), and second, the presence and impacts of “dreamkeepers,” those teachers capable of teaching and improving the lives Black children, and really all children, and what happens in those special places where they “get it right” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. vii).

As Ms. Reed did every time she spoke, her food and teaching metaphor got my mind racing and reflecting. What type of “food” was younger me offering to my students in Chicago back in my ten years in the middle school classroom? How about more recently in my teacher coaching and administrative roles in the Pacific Northwest? Was my food “bland” and thrown together? Or did I have the wherewithal to learn about, let alone cook with some seasoning and love? That said, Ms. Reed made me wonder how prominent of a role should classroom teaching and pedagogy play in achieving more racial equity in K-12.

When Mr. Brill, Mr. James, Ms. Free, and Mr. Douglass shared what racial equity in K-12 meant to them, it seemed that they mostly described it as a process, and a mindset, that was only possible and successful with honest thinking and brave action. I’ll begin with Mr. Brill, who was always very focused and clear in his thinking and ideas. Mr. Brill also had a well-tuned lens of criticality that he often elaborated upon with references to educational concepts, theories, and scholars in the field including but not limited to critical race theory and critical whiteness studies. Mr. Brill initially described
some of the racial equity work he had seen in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest as “skirting around” addressing race and/or racism and instead “using things like diversity or multiculturalism, you know those are buzzwords that I'm able to see through,” he pointed out. Mr. Brill went on:

So I look at it [racial equity] from two different levels, the student level and the teacher level. So, I think first and foremost it's important to address the elephant in the room. What I have noticed is... we try to do racial equity without even talking about race at all, and it just, it boggles my mind [laughing]... From a student level, I think of racial equity as a decision-making process that uses the lens of the most marginalized student, so whoever that is in your district, we need to be looking at what it's like to be that student and creating things around that idea.

Mr. Brill’s description immediately made me think of the need for race-consciousness, as well as Crenshaw’s (1989, 1995, 2020) notion of intersectionality, of which race is a central idea but also only one of multiple multiplicities of human and social identities.

Mr. Brill went on to share about racial equity from a teacher perspective:

Racial equity is ensuring that there is a space for teachers of Color, so whether that's an affinity group that they go to, whether that's, you know, providing some other resources for them, and making sure that you know their evaluators are trained in cultural sensitivity.

I appreciated Mr. Brill’s distinction between students and teachers, and the fact that both of his working definitions implied a fluid process followed by sustained, responsive action.

When I asked Mr. James how he would define racial equity in K-12, he immediately shared “First off, it’s knowing, including, and honoring the broad backgrounds of our students and staff of Color and our communities of Color.” After mentioning the importance of going deeper with identity and how identity is framed in
school, Mr. James described the need to more authentically utilize data, but perhaps not in the traditional testing and achievement lens educators may be expecting, but more so in a critical inquiry lens that would help identify and eventually deconstruct historical, institutional racial barriers. Further, Mr. James explained:

It [racial equity] is using data to really learn the story of the power structures within our schools and how a lot of it is racist and biased, and what we can do to deconstruct that and create more equitable schools. And removing barriers to success that have been historically biased.

Mr. James would later discuss one of those institutional barriers in more detail, that being the historically limited enrollment of students of Color in secondary level advanced courses. Mr. James also believed that data could and should be reconceptualized to tell a more accurate and authentic narrative of our students and communities, which was something that he thought public education (including educators and district leaders) still have lots of room for improvement.

Ms. Free. and Mr. Douglass also followed a similar thread in defining racial equity as a process that included cultivating a historical and sociopolitical consciousness. For example, Ms. Free first described racial equity in more broad terms: “I see racial equity as like dismantling the structure that has been created to sustain white supremacy, right? Through educational privilege and resource hoarding.” Then Ms. Free began to dig more into K-12 schooling and its historical, structural context and roots. She shared:

Schools have evolved since the beginning of public education, right, to reinforce a certain dominant culture, their privilege, their norms, and their values. I mean, that is how education has functioned traditionally, and so in order to achieve racial equity, we have to be really rigorous around what we examine, right? Every single piece of how schools function. How do we organize children within schools? What is meaningful learning? What is familiar and safe? Every piece along our K-12 education has to be really explored and dismantled… Racial
equity would mean that we are operating within systems that reflect the values of all of the communities that we serve.

While Mr. James framed racial equity as deconstructing racist and biased power structures, Ms. Free similarly described a process of “examining” and “exploring” the history of public education while “rigorously” dismantling the pieces that are either complicit or conducive towards the persistence of racial inequity.

Additionally, Mr. Douglass insisted that racial equity work is really an ongoing, intrapersonal journey of learning and action, which includes expanding one’s horizons beyond their own racial upbringing, especially if they had limited experiences with people of Color, which he perceived many of his White colleagues did. Additionally, Mr. Douglass saw value in racial equity as a process that included learning about the historical, structural design and impact of race and racism, why it [race] was created and how it exists, and the impact of race in history and schooling. Mr. Douglass explained that in order to achieve racial equity, all educators needed to acknowledge and accept that yes, their experience is unique, and also that students of Color have experiences different than those of their White peers. Further, Mr. Douglass shared his belief that White educators especially should be driven by both interpersonal empathy and a commitment to more deeply understand and be responsive to the different racialized experiences of their students and communities. Mr. Douglass also elaborated on the complexity of school-based racial equity work, mainly by sharing examples about times when there was pushback from both teachers of Color that were not happy with the way racial equity based trainings or meetings were presented, and also pushback from White teachers, including those that he described as the “woke” White teachers - with a chuckle
accompanying the term woke - who either wanted more information or had their own ideas on how to better frame the work.

In summary, it was clear that racial equity in K-12 meant many things to the participants. Racial equity was the arrival at a reimagined racial reality where race was not a predictor of success or belonging. Racial equity was committing to learning more about and actively working to dismantle historical and contemporary power structures and methodologies that have historically and contemporarily harmed students and communities of Color. Racial equity was a mindset and process for both more equitable decision-making and action planning. Racial equity was a refreshed schooling experience led by highly-equipped teacher-practitioners with effective pedagogical skill sets, great expectations, and love. Racial equity was a more racially diverse teacher population, with intentional and tangible support for teachers of Color. Racial equity was more academic courses that centered the experiences and contributions of people of Color by centering multiple and diverse perspectives and histories. Put differently, racial equity could involve a variety of learning and actions that included intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, structural, and cultural factors. Ms. Reed summed it up well when she shared, “Equity has to be a living and breathing thing, it can't just be a document or policy. And we have to hold ourselves to it; the real devil is to *do* [emphasis added] it.”

It was clear that racial equity in K-12 meant many things to the participants. The participants’ working definitions and descriptions of racial equity painted a complex picture of what racial equity can mean, while also illustrating its variability of forms and thus its potential elusivity of achieving or arriving at a place or state of more racial
equity. I believe there is a similar complexity in the notions of educators *becoming* or even self-proclaiming that they are culturally relevant or responsive or sustaining, or antiracist. It implies that those states of being are fixed things, fixed nouns or identities, as opposed to verbs and adjectives hungry for action, reflection, and renewal. To get more to the core of the participants’ beliefs on what racial equity could be and how we could more intentionally and responsively work towards it, it was important to know where they had been. In other words, to envision the future, we first would revisit participants’ past experiences, and for many of the participants there were institutional barriers that they believed had a strong impact on racial equity work. That said, we will now transition to emergent theme one, “Hierarchies: Institutional presence and precedence in K-12 racial equity work” and the critical exploration of the institutional aspects of racial equity work in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest.
Theme One Hierarchies: Institutional Presence and Precedence in K-12 Racial Equity Work

In this section and theme, I highlight the participants’ ideas and experiences in regard to the varying presence and impact of institutional hierarchies and power, which presented as a variety of barriers, when it came to racial equity work in K-12.

Additionally, when I refer to institutional factors, I am referring to things like policies, practices, and ideologies. Among the many ideas and experiences that the participants shared, each of which will be addressed in turn, were ideas relating to individual and collective responsibilities and needs, accountability, the evolution of practices, the presence of norms, protocols, and data, and perceived barriers.

To begin, I asked the participants about their experiences with their school’s or district’s efforts towards achieving more racial equity, including how racial equity and “racial equity work” were contextualized and defined at their schools and districts. Their answers, individually and at times collectively, illustrated varying levels of institutional precedence and consistency. Table 3 includes a summary of their responses.

**Table 3**

*Racial Equity Work at Your School/District*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>District equity work did not explicitly name race; most equity work is site-dependent and often at the whim of (White) building administrators or staff; puts teachers of Color in hard situations to either help lead it or not have their needs addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>Formal structures didn’t exist (i.e. departments of equity and inclusion nor district-wide approaches); more grassroots efforts and individual efforts were how things happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>Equity can't be something you can opt in or out of; it has to be more than talk and includes supporting teachers and “really hearing, seeing, serving and holding kids to a higher standard.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Ms. Alexander
You need a policy, and a structure, and the policy can be great but it needs “teeth;” there needs to be accountability when racialized inequities continue to persist.

### Mr. James
Saw shift from voluntary to mandated; multifaceted with “soft learning” like identity work and affinity spaces, to mandated learning on how we perceive and treat our students and work to improve experiences and outcomes, which includes professional learning.

### Ms. Free
Equity work is typically defined in deficit terms (e.g. underperforming students vs. students being underserved) and is mostly a grassroots effort of teachers of Color, or rarely with district administrators of Color. The work changes as staff change.

### Mr. Douglass
Building level variations; site administrators are facilitating the trainings with autonomy and no formal framework.

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**Note.** How were/are racial equity, and “racial equity work,” contextualized and defined at your school/district? What does school-based “racial equity work” look like? Feel like?

When I asked the project participants how racial equity and racial equity work were contextualized and defined at their schools or districts, and what the work felt and looked like, there were a variety of answers, very few of which aligned to the participants’ original descriptions of what racial equity meant to them personally. For example, Mr. Brill shared that his district’s general equity policy was strong, but that there was no specific mention of race. Mr. Brill explained, “I don't know if that is our district being aware that intersectionality exists, or appeasing the community in this interpretivist way, and that's kind of what I think it is.” Mr. Brill explained further, “[the equity stance] it’s like an attempt to say we're trying to do the right thing without really calling out what the right thing is, like let's just leave it ambiguous so enough people can interpret it however they really want to.” Mr. Brill described how he felt that there was a focus on social emotional learning (SEL), but that such a SEL focus absent of an intentionality regarding race and racism was inadequate when thinking of students of Color and their experiences. Mr. Brill elaborated:
It's all about social emotional, you know? And of course we want to take care of the social emotional needs of our students, but once again, I mean race is the underlying factor, right? Like we can't take care of our Black and Brown and Indigenous students’ social emotional well-being if we are completely absent of the conversation of race.

Perhaps before doing SEL work, institutions could consider what social or emotional damage has been done within or across the institution - both historically and contemporarily - and to consider what is the role of race and racism. Further, this idea of race-consciousness, which is central in critical race scholarship, made me think back to how Ms. Alexander quickly and clearly described racial equity as when race stopped being a predictor of outcomes and experiences for students, staff, and communities of Color. Ms. Alexander’s definition was explicit, race conscious, and therefore could be explicitly worked towards and even measured, which we would discuss the use (and misuse) of data later on. What Mr. Brill had described, to me, sounded like equity was framed as something that could perhaps mean everything, such as “success for all” or a “barrier-free environment,” and therefore maybe nothing tangible or actional at all.

**Whose Responsibility and Whose Needs?**

In this section, I address the ways in which the notion of responsibility came up in racial equity work. The participants shared examples of what they perceived as responsibility and irresponsibility within and across institutional hierarchies, as well as responsibility when it came to both individual and collective needs, with/in racial equity work. A consistent, provocatively reflective question that arose throughout the interviews was whose responsibility is racial equity work, and to whom?
Mr. Brill shared that he felt there was an institutional “filtration system,” as well as a building-level irresponsibility, that posed barriers to more impactful and consistent racial equity work in schools. Previously, Mr. Brill explained how there was a fairly strong district equity policy in his district. He also specifically mentioned an example of curriculum work “making strides” in the Teaching and Learning Department, though Mr. Brill also felt that those efforts didn’t always filter down to his specific school, where he felt there was little to no action regarding racial equity work whatsoever. Mr. Brill explained that he believed site-specific stagnation was due to building administrators, just about all of which were White males in his district and region, and that there was a lack of both responsibility and perhaps individual ability to in fact lead the work. Mr. Brill then began to describe the racial work happening in his school, which was through a voluntary, staff-led committee that became much more race-conscious in the spring and summer of 2020 after the upsurge and hypervisibility of the movement for Black lives and justice. More specifically, after the spring and summer of 2020, the committee began to use the term antiracism in their group name. Mr. Brill also described other schools that had voluntary book clubs. He explained:

I chose very purposefully to not be part of this work [school based committee work] because I felt like, honestly Brad, I'm done trying to train up White educators to do this work, like that's just not where I am in my career. I am more than happy to support these [White] accomplices and these allies who are trying to do this work, but I'm not going to do the work for them, so I chose to not take part in this committee, and that [not taking part] has at times come back to bite me.

In regard to his decision not to join his school’s committee coming back to bite him, Mr. Brill later described how his school’s all-White antiracism committee created a lesson for
student advisory class that connected to the idea of racial equity (which was the only lesson with race explicitly referenced). However, to Mr. Brill’s frustration, the lesson centered around grit and perseverance, and put the onus on the students, not the inequitable systems or structures that have historically and contemporarily limited those students. Mr. Brill reflected:

I shot myself in the foot by not being a part of this committee, and this is kind of like what I get [support and/or guidance that doesn’t meet the needs of teachers or students of Color]. And these are tough waters for teachers of Color to navigate. A lot of the burden [with racial equity work] does fall on our shoulders, so it’s like saying yes to some things and saying no to other things. When I saw that lesson [on grit/perseverance], I’m like, well, this is what I get. This is what I get for not being on this committee because the intention is there, but it clearly missed the target in such a way that this probably actually made it worse, right?

This begs the question, whose responsibility is it to change systems and structures that burden, and even harm, students and teachers of Color? And who and how are people individually and collectively accountable and responsible for the work? This got me thinking about something Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones shared in the context of changing historically and predominantly White systems and structures:

“The burden to change systems cannot always be on the people who are being excluded from those systems,” Hannah-Jones (2021) urged.

Additionally, Mr. Brill also described a tension and complexity he felt with his school’s racial equity work and his own personal involvement. Mr. Brill explained that the voluntary antiracism committee at his school was composed of all White educators, and that led to him sharing a specific and powerful sentiment about his own needs and visibility in racial equity work:
You know, whenever I go to admin[istrators] and talk to them about my frustrations [with racial equity work or the lack thereof], their only suggestion is ‘Oh well, you know why don't you attend the meetings [all White antiracism committee]? That's the work that they're doing, so...’ You know that's frustrating. And then to be a part of professional development that was created by an all-White staff, as good as their intentions are... as a Black man I am hypervisible, but my needs are invisible.

Mr. Brill’s description of his race making him hypervisible and his needs being invisible was, for me, one of the most powerful and memorable moments of this project and learning. It got me thinking back to the basic question that hovered beneath this entire project: Who is racial equity work truly for? What is the impact - not intent - and on whom? And says whom? And how do we measure racial equity to hold ourselves and each other accountable and responsible for continuing to build forward towards it?

Mr. Brill pondered on the complexity of being included in K-12 racial equity work that didn’t address his needs as a Black man. Further, he wondered, “Do you tell staff of Color like hey, you don't need to participate in this [racial equity work] because it's going to be traumatic, but then not all staff of Color are there in their journeys of self-discovery.” He then added to the racialized complexity by directly challenging the notion of essentialism with teachers of Color in racial equity work. More specifically, Mr. Brill shared a story about a time earlier in his career when he had an administrator of Color who did not support him having critical and historically honest conversations with students about race, history, and the law. “You know,” Mr. Brill reflected, “that was a lesson for me. Like just because you are a teacher or educator of Color doesn't mean that you're bought into social justice.” Similarly, Cherry-McDaniel’s (2019) powerful Skinfolk ain’t always kinfolk: The dangers of assuming and assigning inherent cultural
responsiveness to teachers of Color, which is rooted in Black feminism and indigenous studies, addresses this topic specifically. I return to this idea in the next chapter regarding future considerations and recommendations for research.

In sharing her experience with school-based racial equity work, Ms. Molkera described it as mostly a “grassroots” individual-led movement with little district or site leadership or buy-in. “Grassroots” was a term that both Ms. Molkera and Ms. Free used often as they both seemed to situate the most meaningful accomplishments of school-based racial equity work in places where there was little district-wide work or vision, but instead, pockets of strong, visionary teachers, mostly teachers of Color, doing special and powerful things together.

Further, Ms. Free also had some very pointed and critical reflections when she shared about her more than two decades of personal and professional experiences with racial equity work and related institutional factors. For example, Ms. Free shared:

You know, I very much witnessed and participated in racial equity work being the responsibility of educators of Color, framed in that deficit, like there's something wrong with our [emphasis added] kids rather than a systematic responsibility of all of us in the system to take care of all of our students. You know it was Black and Brown folks were responsible for Black and Brown kids.

Ms. Free consistently and persuasively critiqued the framing of racial equity work, which is what I agree is a complex and predictable barrier. Who is racial equity work for? Says whom? And whose responsibility is it? Also as Mr. Brill previously shared, who is hypervisible and whose needs are invisible? Further, Ms. Free explained the pervasiveness of deficit framing when she shared the example that, “It wasn't about [students] being underserved, right? It was about students underperforming, and I think
that we still use some of that same language.” This goes back to Ms. Free’s critique of the centering of students in a deficit frame as opposed to seeing the systems as deficient, and the lack of accountability for the systems to change. Similarly, this is what Gorski (2019) referred to as the “FixInjusticeNotKids Principle” (p. 61) in racial equity work, or not trying to “fix” students, but instead eliminating the racist conditions that harm and impact them.

Ms. Free also described the durable and disappointing reality that many of the both formal and informal district efforts towards achieving more racial equity work were the hallmarks and legacies of individual district leaders, not the systems and structures of district leadership. She also shared that often changes in leadership or new leadership altogether meant altered or erased efforts and priorities. For example, Ms. Free recalled and warmly described one of her former district administrators, a woman of Color that I will refer to here as Ms. X. As Ms. Free described Ms. X and her legacy, it seemed to bring tears to Ms. Free’s eyes. Ms. Free mused:

Ms. X was, I would say, a guardian angel, but she's more fierce than an angel. And she was the conscience of the district, like she really was. You know, at one time, any meaningful work that happened in our district happened because she was there, and then [new leadership came] and that was the end of that particular era.

Even in recalling this disappointing reality of changing leadership and changing priorities, Ms. Free rarely lost the sparkle in her eye and mind, and the optimism and hope that arose when she fondly recalled her own personal grassroots efforts, both past and present. Further, Ms. Free shared that, “All of the authentic work that happened, you know, was a result of grassroots efforts,” she nodded, “not surprising.” She recalled one
of her favorite grassroots efforts at a previous job when she was a classroom teacher and worked with students on racial justice projects tied to current events. “I hope it [racial justice work with students] continued with my departure,” she confided, while looking off to the ground beside her.

Similar to how Ms. Free and Ms. Molkera described more grassroots and less districtwide racial equity efforts, Mr. Douglass shared that in his experience racial equity work was individual site-based and dependent on whether or not individual sites and leaders could find enough teachers that were interested. He described what he felt was a shift towards increased accountability with racial equity work, primarily in the year 2020, which will be discussed later in the chapter regarding the second theme which includes the racial justice movement for Black lives and justice and COVID-19 pandemic.

**Accountability in Racial Equity Work: Whose and to Whom?**

In this section I address the ways in which accountability in racial equity work was a confusing and frustrating notion for many of the participants, which was similar to previously discussed ideas and questions regarding responsibility in racial equity work - who was responsible and accountable for racial equity work, and to whom?

For over half of the participants, the idea of accountability, or lack thereof, came up on multiple occasions. For example, Ms. Reed shared that racial equity work was talked about, but she also expressed a frustration that talking about racial equity was not and does not have an impact, nor would such talk hold people accountable to do anything at all. Ms. Reed explained:

We haven’t held anyone to it [racial equity work]. I mean, it may not feel easy for some people to talk about. I get that. But I think anyone who gets to opt in or opt
out, just talking about it alone isn't gonna raise the love. Equity has to be a living and breathing thing.

Ms. Reed’s critique on talk and not action was similar to a frustration that many of the participants shared about racial equity work in their schools and districts.

In a slightly different take on accountability, Mr. Brill described how a lack of accountability could also come in the form of district and building administrators not supporting teachers who were committed to racial equity work both in the classroom and beyond, which he felt directly and negatively impacted teachers. Mr. Brill explained:

So like whether it's accountability [to engage in racial equity work], whether it's administrators supporting teachers who are trying to do the work, those structures don't exist, which we know creates burnout which is why teachers leave. They stop doing the work.

Interestingly enough, there was only one school district across the seven participants and seven districts included in this project that had a specific racial equity policy, as opposed to a more general equity policy like Mr. Brill had previously critiqued, and it was Ms. Alexander’s district. However, Ms. Alexander was quick to point out, “but there are no teeth to it [the racial equity policy]. There's no enforcement.” This seemed to strike a nerve for Ms. Alexander. She went on:

So this is our policy and this is what we believe, but what happens to a teacher when year after year their Black students are being outperformed by their White students regardless of income? What happens? What happens when there's no change? What happens when a White teacher accuses a Black staff member of being abrasive or harsh or bullying, when all that staff member did was speak their truth? What happens? There's a beautiful policy, but there's no accountability.

Ms. Alexander’s frustration about the persistence of racial inequity for both students and staff of Color, paired with a lack of accountability, a lack of “teeth” and enforcement,
was clear. This made me wonder about both educators’ and school districts’ accountability to having more racially equitable outcomes for teachers and students of Color. What should, or could be the accountability measures for teachers when stubborn and ages-old racial inequities persist? As a former school administrator, this got me thinking about plans of assistance that teachers need to work through if they are rated “unsatisfactory” in any of the evaluated domains. What could a plan of assistance look like for those in need of assistance in the realm of racial equity? What about an administrator in need of assistance? Or even a school district? Would such a measure be fair to include, and able to be accurately measured? And also, who would deem something or someone as obstructing more educational racial equity? Says whom, right? 

A Perceived Evolution of District Practices in Racial Equity Work 

In this section, I address the ways in which three participants, Mr. James, Ms. Free, and Ms. Alexander, perceived and described three different examples highlighting the pace and direction of racial equity work in their experiences and districts over time. Table 4 includes a summary of highlighted responses in this section.

Table 4 

The Evolution of District Racial Equity Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Evolution from more “soft and self-work” like identity exploration to more district-wide work including gathering student and community voice and site-specific initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Free</td>
<td>Grassroots efforts that turned into district-wide efforts but were stalled or stopped when they got too critical and/or when new administration took over leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Alexander</td>
<td>School racial equity teams that engage in inquiry cycles.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Participants’ ideas on the perceived evolution of district practices in racial equity work.
Mr. James shared a timeline of his experiences with school-based racial equity work over the span of his career, which at the time of our conversations spanned about 20 years. Over that time, Mr. James described racial equity work as growing from initially more voluntary and site-based projects to more current district initiatives and protocols. For example, Mr. James recalled racial equity work beginning with a “very slow-moving exploration of identity,” and what he described as “more self and soft work.” Further, Mr. James then detailed what he perceived to be a shift in racial equity work that was sparked by the more intentional inclusion and prioritization of more student and community voices, as well as intentionally-designed site-based projects and initiatives.

For example, Mr. James recalled a specific a Black student affinity group he worked with years ago, which brought a smile to his face. “I remember them well,” he reflected warmly, even mentioning a few students by name. He went on, “It was a space for kids [of the same race] to feel connected to one another amongst others who share similar experiences,” which was not easy to do in his predominantly and historically White region.

Mr. James then began to share about more current districtwide racial equity efforts, which in his district were formally required, unlike the districts of many of the other project participants. Mr. James shared:

So we have equity teams [that focus on racial equity], and they’re required. You know, and I think it's important that it’s [racial equity] part of the professional development model to actually foster real change. It’s as important as making staff sit through the bus evacuation training that we do every year, right? We need to think about student safety and well-being [racially]. Feeling like your identity doesn't make you vulnerable, doesn't make you susceptible to mistreatment. Makes you feel welcome. That's one of the most important things we can do for students, to make them feel welcome.
It was interesting and encouraging to hear Mr. James describe the shift from more personal and voluntary identity work to more formally required equity work that considered students’ well-being and inclusion.

Additionally, Ms. Free also detailed how she had seen a variety of racial equity efforts in her more than 20 years in K-12 the Pacific Northwest, including some district-wide efforts, which was also encouraging. For example, Ms. Free described a group of strong educators, primarily teachers of Color who she referred to lovingly as “the usual suspects,” who made up a district equity team. Ms. Free reflected positively on the work of the team, the relationships that formed throughout the duration of their work, and the specific goals they worked towards which included increasing the recruitment and retention of educators of Color, lesson planning highlighting culturally responsive teaching, and supporting building administrators with professional development on topics related to racial equity. Additionally, the educators that were part of this districtwide racial equity work were paid by the district for their additional time and efforts. However, things began to come to an end when two things happened. Ms. Free explained:

I think a pattern is... once you move from the place of like diversity and multiculturalism... and affinity spaces where people gather, to being authentically critical, you know that’s when it's gotta disappear, right?

Ms. Free’s sentiments about the evolution of more critical racial equity work as opposed to diversity and multiculturalism were nearly identical to something Mr. Brill shared earlier when he said: “We have to talk about race and if we're skirting around… diversity or multiculturalism, those are buzzwords I'm able to see through… and I don't want to devalue them, but that’s very different than racial justice and racial equity.”
Additionally, Ms. Free went on to describe the other thorn in the side of the racial equity work, changes in leadership and administration, which she had described earlier when she told me about Ms. X (an administrator of Color) her district’s “fierce guardian angel” of racial equity work. Ms. Free previously shared, “You know, at one time, any meaningful work that happened in our district happened because she [Ms. X] was there, and then [new leadership came] and that was the end of that particular era.” This phenomenon of beginnings and ends begs a more critical look at how education must not only include relevant and responsive racial equity work, but also how it must be sustained. Amidst these challenges, including the pushback of more critical work and the loss of committed leadership, Ms. Free still outlined what she believed was a very simple beginning to authentically grounded and responsive racial equity work in schools and districts: She shared, “You know, actually reaching out to teachers of Color and saying, what are you seeing? What do you need? What do you think students need? That doesn't happen often.”

Finally, Ms. Alexander shared strong examples of current, action-oriented racial equity efforts. More specifically, Ms. Alexander shared that her school has a racial equity team that is representative of the staff in terms of both racial demographics, and that the team includes a variety of positions across the building including teachers, educational assistants, paraeducators, as well as custodial and nutrition service staff when they are able to participate. The work of this school-based racial equity team was in addition to a districtwide focus on racial equity which prioritized interracial dialogue and
conversations, which was the foundation of the district’s racial equity efforts and that will be discussed more in depth in the following section.

In terms of the scope of the racial equity team’s work, Ms. Alexander explained that it was very similar to other working teams in the building such as multi-tiered systems of support or math or literacy committees. Further, each committee worked within an inquiry cycle by first identifying a problem in the school or community, which the racial equity team did with a race-conscious approach, examining the problem and considering their job-specific implications and/or role with it, collecting data, taking steps “no matter how big or small,” she clarified, and then repeating the cycle. However, when I asked Ms. Alexander more broadly about the entire district and the presence, structure, and scope of such racial equity teams and/or work, Ms. Alexander laughed out loud, to which I laughed and asked, “So… is it fair to say that it depends on where you’re at?” She smiled and nodded her head, “It depends on where you at,” she confirmed knowingly. This confirmed what Mr. Douglass had shared earlier, that much work related to racial equity was completely site-dependent.

**On Norms and Protocols in School Racial Equity Work**

In this section, I address the roles and impacts of intentionally utilized norms and/or protocols in school-based racial equity work, as well as their perceived effectiveness. Ms. Alexander’s experience is highlighted in depth. Table 5 includes a summary of highlighted responses in this section.

**Table 5**

*School/District Norms and Practices*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
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Ms. Alexander's *Courageous Conversations*: “Not only did it change my career, my outlook on my career, but it actually changed my life. It changed my whole life.”

*Note.* To what extent were/are established norms or practices present in your school’s racial equity work?

When asked about the use of norms or protocols in school-based racial equity work, which I would argue can be important considerations regarding a more formal, institutional commitment to racial equity work, nearly all of the participants cited a lack of them altogether. However, Ms. Alexander’s response was undoubtedly the outlier and the most positive of any of the participants’ responses regarding her district’s racial equity work.

Ms. Alexander detailed how her district worked explicitly with the framework as outlined in Singleton’s (2006/2014) *Courageous Conversations About Race*. More specifically, *Courageous Conversations* is a protocol and strategy for engaging, sustaining, and deepening interracial dialogue, and it is grounded in four agreements and six conditions. The four agreements are: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure. The six conditions are: focus on personal, local, and immediate; isolate race, normalize social construction and multiple perspectives, monitor agreements and conditions and establish parameters, use a “working definition” for race, and examine the presence and role of whiteness (Singleton, 2006; 2014). When talking about *Courageous Conversations* and its impact on her and her experience in district and school racial equity work, Ms. Alexander was very clear:

That experience to me [using *Courageous Conversations*], not only did it change my career, my outlook on my career, but it actually changed my life. It changed my whole life. For the first time I felt heard, I felt seen, I felt that I could speak my truth without there being any kind of retaliation or white fragility. I felt validated. I’m finally like, no, I’m not crazy, these things [racialized experiences
and racism] are happening to me and are happening to other Black and Brown people in the field and in the world. So the work that we did with Singleton, it was slow, but it was methodical. And I appreciated it because we had something to anchor our work to.

Ms. Alexander went on to share very practically that when using the *Courageous Conversations* agreements and conditions, “It worked.” She went on:

> It worked to actually have a conversation with a colleague about race. A colleague of a different race about race. And they were pretty much guaranteed to listen, to offer me feedback as well. And on the flip side, I didn't take it so personally when there was pushback from staff because I understood that that's just where they are [White colleagues] in the journey. And also it's not my job to carry on furthering their journey, like that's on you [White educators]. So I was able to leave some responsibility as well.

It was very clear that having an established and formally adopted framework to engage in racial equity work, in this case to deepen interracial dialogue towards achieving more racial equity in schools, was very meaningful and effective for Ms. Alexander, both personally and professionally. “It felt fantastic,” she later shared matter-of-factly. Additionally, having such a protocol relieved a sense of responsibility to “carry” or “further” White educators in their journey, a similar notion Mr. Brill referred to when he shared bluntly, “honestly Brad, I'm done trying to train up White educators to do this work, like that's just not where I am in my career.” This idea of the burden, even taxation of energy and efforts to carry and/or train White colleagues in issues related to racism or racial equity is more deeply in chapter five.

Building on the idea and importance of interracial dialogue, while Ms. Reed’s district and school did not have a formal structure for norms or protocols to guide them like Ms. Alexander’s, Ms. Reed did speak to the need and value of such spaces and interracial conversations and coalitions. Ms. Reed explained:
Thinking groups need to be diverse. We need to put people together that don't agree, right? I find myself after work, meeting to talk to my support group that confirms my bias. I need that confirmation. But if I can't get out of that and have somebody who thinks or lives or experiences things differently, the truth is we just can't grow well.

Ms. Reed then went on to use another memorable metaphor to describe the need for diverse perspectives and functions to stimulate growth, just like in gardens.

I mean, you know if you've ever tended to a garden, it matters that you put certain plants by other plants, not its same plant. You know we gotta have some marigolds or something, you know the plants that help other plants. And they think different and they do a different function.

Not being a skilled or experienced gardener myself, I had to do a little research on marigolds to really understand what Ms. Reed meant. According to the website *Gardening know how* marigolds are “dependable bloomers” that “have pest-repellent properties that help keep nearby plants healthy and free of harmful bugs” (Dyer, 2021, para. 1). Additionally, marigolds are drought-tolerant and thrive when it gets very hot, and they “aren’t fussy about soil type” (para. 6). My mind was racing with making connections to the role and impact of majoritarian White educators in racial equity work and Ms. Reed’s metaphor.

Maybe Ms. Reed didn’t mean it in all the ways I was perceiving her to, but it made sense. How could the garden, or the school and community, thrive by intentionally working alongside diverse and unique abilities and functions? And more so, how could the majoritarian White staff take on more of the burden of racial equity work, perhaps even assume more of the risks involved? More specifically, how could White educators work together to keep away harmful bugs and pests, and to withstand things when they got really hot, and not to be fussy about it? It was an interesting thought. However, there
were also some things about marigolds from *Gardening know how* (Dyer, 2021) that the metaphor wasn’t as apt for, for example that once the flowers are planted, they need very little in the way of care. Care, maintenance, reflection, action, even renewal; in racial equity work, those are definitely needed to keep those bloomers healthy and dependable.

**Data: More Than Just Numbers?**

In this section I highlight participants’ recollections of school or district goals regarding racial equity, as well as the established uses of data or any other ways to engage in or measure the impact of the work. Table 6 includes a summary of highlighted responses.

**Table 6**

*Goals and Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>Data helps us know what to do, and data can be used to humanize students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Traditional academic outcomes data and “panoramic data” that looked at things like SEL, sports, and health. Cautioned for data to be used to frame people of Color as victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>Data is not being collected or used other than seemingly isolated effort with student interviews. Other data metrics were not available in multiple languages and phone calls to gather community input were only done in English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. How did your school/district establish and measure goals and/or ongoing results of the school-based racial equity work? To what extent was “data” collection and analysis used? And what constituted “data”? For whom and by whom?*

In my experience in K-12 public education and racial equity work, I’ve seen data used in a variety of ways with varying effectiveness, and so I was very interested in how the participants had experienced the use of data, as well its potential role in goal-setting, with/in racial equity work. For example, throughout my almost twenty years in public education, I’ve seen administrators promote an excessive (and I would argue irrational)
centering of student standardized test scores as they relate to the “achievement gap.”

More specifically, I’ve seen students who were asked to memorize their statistical and coded reading levels, and verbally share their test scores and goal scores for school visitors. I’ve also seen staff book clubs with texts on how to use statistical analysis with student data measures. While I would question the benefits such measures have towards more racial equity, I should note that I’ve also seen some very different uses of data such as educators identifying a “focal student,” or a student that they would like to intentionally learn more about and engage through specific culturally relevant and responsive techniques. In some instances, I’ve seen teachers observed (in a non-evaluative way) by peers who are aware of who their focal student is, which is followed by collaboratively created next steps and goal setting for their focal student(s). I’ve also seen data used as a figurative weapon with the potential to destroy efforts and initiatives with the simple and overly-generalized question, “Has it changed student outcomes?”

That said, our measures matter, as do our conceptualizations of data, success, and outcomes, and so I was curious about the participants’ experiences.

Specifically, I asked the participants “To what extent was ‘data’ collection and analysis used? And what constituted “data”? For whom and by whom?” I’ll start with Mr. James, who outlined how his district had used data in a more traditional sense, which he explained used data sets like academic grades, graduation rates, college rates, and the like. However, Mr. James also spoke of the importance of what he called “panoramic data,” such as social and emotional well-being measures, and student participation in extracurriculars like sports and clubs. Even though he described this panoramic data as
very valuable, he still cautioned the collection and interpretation of such data. Mr. James shared:

The trickier part is to accurately capture the narratives of our communities of Color...you know like when we talk about our Hispanic community of Color. Are we talking about people who are from a migrant background and just got here within five years? Are we talking about, you know, multiple generations [in the U.S.]? Are we talking about people who identify as Chicano? People with their roots in Mexico or another Latin American, Spanish speaking country? And so, like, those are things that I think we're... missing the mark on today.

Mr. James perceived a problem with the notion of generalizing communities of Color while attempting to disaggregate information for the purpose of better understanding different communities and their unique needs and experiences.

Another important point Mr. James made about data was what he framed as the negative impact data can have on students of Color being framed as victims. He explained:

When we see the [racialized] disparities, we equate that with victimization. And then we have staff engaging with every single person of Color as if they are a victim. And you can sense that. I don't feel victimized.

Ultimately, what I heard Mr. James saying was that we needed to work towards seeking and understanding a more accurate narrative of both students of Color and communities of Color; we needed to get specific and avoid generalizations; we needed to avoid victimization of people of Color, particularly students of Color; and we needed to think beyond the more traditional academic outcomes and achievement data. Mr. James also problematized attempts at gathering data that aren’t always accessible to all members of the community, such as community surveys that were only offered in English.
Similarly, Mr. Brill also referenced English-only communication and data-seeking as problematic. While Mr. Brill’s initial answer to the question about data had a frank and quick answer - “As far as data, like, it doesn't exist, at least at my school” - he did later share two examples including a critique and an idea worth sharing. More specifically, Mr. Brill described what he perceived as very limited district-wide efforts to gather community feedback, and also he took issue with an example of his school district seeking information regarding returning to in-person instructions after COVID-19 school closures, which was done through surveys and phone calls only in English. Mr. Brill pointed out, “Like there's all of these factors that prevent historically marginalized populations from being able to voice how they're feeling.” As for an area of possibility and idea towards more growth, Mr. Brill shared how one district office department was using “student empathy interviews” to learn more about student experiences in a certain content area, which that data was then used to help drive the need for curricular change and considerations on content and standards being covered, though he felt that was an isolated incident. What could it look like to more systematically and consistently seek student and community voice, and to do so in students’ home languages as well?

Additionally, Ms. Free opened by sharing how she felt data could hurt and harm racial equity work and its progress and development. “People can be like, ‘Well, has it changed the data?’ Right? So that's, you know, the data is a weapon.” Ms. Free went on to describe how she believed data has been used and misused historically, and how if data is not viewed with a critical lens, she thought it was useless. She shared:

On some people’s part, there is like a genuine desire to use the data to move teachers and buildings. Like you know, in a direction where folks would start to
kind of reflect on their own practice, right? However, I think that the actual impact, you know the intention versus impact, and the impact is to reinforce these narratives around student [racial] deficits. So, I just want to be kind, and a little bit compassionate, like I think that data could move the needle for some, right? But, I mean, I think that without a critical exploration of the measures, and the larger kind of sociopolitical context of schooling, it's you know, like we don't need to look at data when you know it's going to be the same [e.g. achievement “gap,” discipline “gap”]. You know, it's like of what use is that, ultimately?

Ms. Free’s sentiments made me think of Lorde’s (1984) famous line (as also cited in chapter one), “the master's tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 112). Will using the same old tools of standardized testing and discipline data lead to genuine change in education, and with regards to racial equity?

One of the (many) things that I noticed and always appreciated about Ms. Free is that while she was intuitively critical about many things that she felt stalled or detoured efforts towards more racial equity, she was simultaneously a critical thinker that offered tangible ideas and actions. For example, similar to the role and potential of “panoramic data” that Mr. James had mentioned (i.e. social and emotional well-being measures), Ms. Free mentioned the more widespread use of climate surveys as important data as a “turning point.” Further, she shared:

We started to look at student narrative and experience as data, and so that has been helpful and also kind of a temperature check of what's going on for students in schools, are they safe, how does that impact learning, and sense of belonging, and ultimately learning and achievement.

Ultimately, many of the project participants saw data as having much more potential than it has traditionally been used for, especially the more qualitative data such as “panoramic” data.
Another aspect of data that Ms. Reed highlighted was the idea of both “humanizing” data and seeking data in an effort to humanize students. To clarify, I draw from the conceptualization of “humanizing research” set forth by Paris and Winn (2014), which can include qualitative and ethnographic inquiry with youth and their communities and things like portraits, narratives, photographs, music, and much more. In other words, humanizing data can be many unique and diverse things that bring ideas and actions to life in an effort towards more humanization and positive change. Ms. Reed went on to share a small, but I believe significant, example of shifting the narrative with more humanizing data.

Anytime I go to an IEP, I bring a picture of the student, and a work sample. This is a little human being, so I think if we use data, like imagine if they showed a picture of every single student and only then you started attaching numbers. What could be the impact(s) if we sought to more intentionally humanize our students as more than test scores and discipline data? In my experiences, I’ve seen some schools and administrators use pictures, photographs, and other work samples to humanize their “focal students” in racial equity work, and it feels much different than a more traditional “data wall” of charts, tables, and graphs.

Ms. Reed went on to describe another example of seeing students as more than statistics, and more so as people with identities that should be intentionally, inclusively, and thoughtfully welcomed in the school community. She shared a routine she had, one that she follows every single morning:

You know, I have this routine that I do. I say every student's name before I walk in the door, right in the frame, I just say it so that when they pass, they know that one time today somebody at this school or just in their life said their name in an uplift. You know, I just say every name and I am religious, so then I just ask God
to give me what they need that day. But my point is just saying their name, you know?

While saying students’ names may sound like a small act, I would argue it is much more. When Ms. Reed shared this ritual, I thought of the importance of creating space for student identity in culturally and historically responsive teaching, which includes names and even telling name stories as a way for students to more authentically see themselves in learning and in school (Muhammad, 2020). Such experiences like name stories can create space for students “to know, validate, and celebrate who they are” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 69). That said, when we use data in school, specifically with/in racial equity work, how can we be intentional and thoughtful to avoid deficit thinking, and to instead seek to know, humanize, validate, and celebrate who our students truly are?

Ms. Reed also critiqued the misuse of data by school leaders when she shared, “[What if data] wasn't just some blanket statistic that they're putting up to make you feel bad when you know you're doing everything you think you can, you know? Equity work has to really get deep. Deep [emphasis added].” When Ms. Reed shared this, I thought back to the countless times I had seen administrators project student data in front of the whole staff, sometimes clearly identified by class and teacher name, in an effort to rally the teachers, but with typically different results including disengagement, shame, and guilt. Similarly, Mr. Douglass shared his own critical reflections of the usefulness of more traditional data. He shared that whether on measures of attendance, assessment, or graduation, traditional data “gap gazing” would simply highlight the issue but do nothing to address it. After all, what good is that? And to whose benefit?
When I asked Ms. Alexander about the use of data in racial equity work, she laughed, and then shared, “Off the top of my head, I cannot tell you what the district is doing. I could tell you what my colleague and I are doing.” I kindly asked her to share and what she did share, which will be included in full out of respect for her thoughtfulness and to the benefit of the reader seeking tangible and relevant ideas, I believe serves as a powerful, on-the-ground example of what data-informed racial equity efforts can look like. Ms. Alexander started by defining data and sharing how we as educators can, in her opinion, “do better” with data. Ms. Alexander shared:

I feel like data can be anything. Data can be attendance, can be how many times you talk, data can be how many parents you’ve called. Data can be student work, right then and there, grab it, see what everybody did and see what you need to change, and a lot of this stuff as teachers we kind of do inherently without thinking, but we can do better. I feel like we can all do a better job of diving deep and making more intentional plans based on the data. You know, how to analyze it. But when it comes to planning and doing something about it, we are hopeless. We are helpless.

After describing how she saw data and its potential, Ms. Alexander got into how she and her colleague were using data to better reach, engage, and support their Black students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Alexander shared:

A goal this year was to engage in action research, and so what we [Ms. Alexander and a colleague] did was we wrote down the names of all of our Black students and then we went through and we color-coded and highlighted students who were below benchmark academically. Students who receive special education services. Students who belong to a single parent household, not saying that that's a detriment. And it was a speculation because they don't tell us, but students who we believe are offered reduced lunch or receiving federal assistance. Students whose fathers were absent or incarcerated. And we took the students with the most intersections and we provided some extra services. For one of the services we created a learning pod outside of the school [during COVID-19 school closures]. One of the things that a lot of our White parents did was, you know they had the capital and the space and the ability to work from home and all the rest of that stuff. And so, they called up their neighbors and they're like, ‘well,
why don't we just get all our kids together and we'll come to this house every day, and then you know they'll eat lunch here, they'll do their work together.’ So they automatically have that community leverage which some of our students of Color are coming from [here she named different locations that students had to travel far from to get to school] so they don't necessarily have that same community leverage as far as proximity to each other. And so, we did a learning pod at two different churches that are close to the school. And so, once we started doing that, their teachers reported that they were attending class more regularly. Those attending classes turned in work more regularly. And then they started to build friendships and relationships with each other and start, you know, started asking people for each other's houses and so that community aspect that was a given for our White students was cultivated, built for these students who are struggling the most. And we were intentional about the instructors that we hired. The instructors were young Black women, so there's an empowerment for them, and it was also strategic because the neighborhood churches that we used are also community hubs so, you know, if this family gets into trouble, they know that they can turn to this church. So it is a whole big community concept.

The notion of equity work, and racial equity work being a “whole big community concept,” felt like a gamechanger to me, and as I listened to Ms. Alexander describe her efforts, I thought of the ways Stovall (2013b) conceptualized critical race praxis in education (CRPE), which was outlined in chapter two. Ms. Alexander was describing the CRPE principles in practice.

For example, CRPE is rooted in educational, sociological, and public health scholarship that prioritizes community alliances and the embracing of often complex, nuanced, and contextualized racial realities of underrepresented and under-resourced communities of Color (Stovall, 2013b). In this context, COVID-19 struck, families and their children’s lives and education were impacted, many communities of Color were disproportionately impacted (Kendi, 2020a), and Ms. Alexander and her colleague got creative and met people where they were to build bridges and cultivate community. The actions of Ms. Alexander and her colleague were what Stovall (2013b) described as the
“tangible” and “explicit” actions with and in communities that are responsive and tailored to community, political, and economic realities, as opposed to more “abstract” theorizing (Stovall, 2013b, p. 294). Put differently, Ms. Alexander’s work embodied the core principles of racial and social justice; from principles to practice.

Additionally, Ms. Alexander’s example made me think of the ways Stovall (2017) conceptualized “fugitive spaces,” (p.332) which can be unique places where Black people seek alternative environments and community in an ongoing quest for freedom from white supremacist culture. Stovall described the value of such “fugitive spaces”:

If we reflect on our lives, many of us were educated in fugitive spaces that go unnoticed. It is in these spaces that we are guided by teachers, loved ones, and other community members that are willing to share with us the secrets to navigate a vicious situation (Stovall, 2017, p. 332).

Perhaps Ms. Alexander was providing a fugitive space from the COVID-19 pandemic, and from, as Ms. Free would later characterize it, the “other pandemic,” or “the pandemic of racism.”

**Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction**

In this section I highlight participants’ recollections of both satisfying and dissatisfying instances of their school and/or district’s work towards more racial equity. As the interviews went on and both trust and relationships seemed to be deepening, we began to discuss more personal and more nuanced examples and experiences with/in racial equity work. For example, when I asked the participants about their satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with their school's/district’s racial equity work and efforts, many discussed much more personal and specific instances and recollections with regard to school and district leadership and decision making, again highlighting
hierarchical and institutional factors that can benefit or burden racial equity efforts. Table 7 includes a summary of the participants’ responses on their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their school’s/district’s racial equity work.

**Table 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Dissatisfaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Douglass</td>
<td>Doing more professional development focused on race in general, also a growing understanding that it's OK not to be an expert as people do their best to improve.</td>
<td>Not knowing the long-term vision and goal of racial equity work; working with a spectrum of beliefs and people who vocalize detours and have beliefs that there is no problem that needs fixing because of the skin they are in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>More inclusive environments, and therefore students of Color will expect more from society, which they deserve.</td>
<td>Racial equity work being “co-opted” by White people and the prioritization of things like white identity and emotions, to be further discussed in the section “Furthering the school’s racial equity work, holding it back, or maintaining the status quo?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Free</td>
<td>Co-creating student leadership opportunities for students of Color to form community and learn more about social justice and history.</td>
<td>Racial equity work feeling like it is the responsibility of educators of Color; many district-led efforts were the legacies of individual district leaders, not the systems and structures of district leadership, as discussed in the section “Whose responsibility and whose needs?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>Grassroots and personal efforts for leadership opportunities for students of Color, and more diverse curriculum and course offerings, discussed in the section “Whose responsibility and whose needs?”</td>
<td>African-American literature classes being cut by administration; the slow pace of change (e.g. it taking 20 years for a more formal equity stance from her school district).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Alexander</td>
<td>Using Singleton’s <em>Courageous Conversations</em>; site-based efforts with colleagues.</td>
<td>Stopping the use of Singleton’s <em>Courageous Conversations</em>; not prioritizing the recruitment and retention of staff who are committed to racial equity.</td>
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*Note.* What would you say are the biggest breakthroughs, or moments of satisfaction or growth, that you’ve perceived with your school’s racial equity work? How about struggles?
As for satisfaction within his school and district’s racial equity work, Mr. Douglass shared that over the last couple years (especially beginning in the year 2020) he noticed a clear uptick in the amount of school- and district-provided professional development opportunities that included issues related to race and equity, and that there was a growing, collective understanding of the importance of the work. Mr. Douglass also noted that he appreciated the framing of the work that allowed permission for the participants not to be “experts,” but to do their best to improve.

Additionally, and with regard to satisfaction, Mr. James pointed to what he perceived as a better school environment for students of Color as a direct result of more racial equity awareness and work in the schools and district as a whole, and the positive impact that would have on students’ futures. More specifically, Mr. James explained, “Overall there has been a shift into a more welcoming, open environment for kids [of Color], and people are being more intentional and strategic about removing barriers for kids to get into certain classes [referring to advanced courses like Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses].” Mr. James went on, “So in the long term, I think our kids of Color are going to expect more from society, in terms of how they're treated. So I think that's important.” It’s worth noting that Mr. James mentioned limited access to advanced coursework and college engagement activities for students of Color multiple times in our conversations, and it was clear that he believed such limited access was a glaring example of institutional barriers to more racial equity.

When asked about satisfaction in racial equity work, not all participants pointed towards more structural, institutional district-wide racial equity work. For example, Ms.
Free went back to what filled her cup in racial equity work, which was the grassroots work with and alongside her students. Ms. Free shared:

I’d say grassroots advocacy work, and organizing to harness student voice and gather students [of Color] across the region [was most satisfying] because there’s not many students of Color, you know, and bringing them together into a space to share their stories, their experiences…and having student conferences and leadership opportunities, you know, designed to cultivate organic student activism, right? Those are the moments that have been the most satisfying for me personally.

Ms. Free also acknowledged that in some instances, the work to organize affinity spaces and conferences for students of Color did receive district support, including financial support, as well as support from her local teacher’s union, both of which she appreciated greatly.

When the conversations began to shift into how school and district efforts towards more racial equity were dissatisfying, some of the participants shared specific district moves that they disagreed with or were let down by, and some shared more personal, emotional, and at times traumatic experiences that they personally had. For example, Ms. Molkera, who was a strong advocate for the presence of student leadership experiences for students of Color (e.g. Black Student Unions) and students having opportunities for more diverse curriculum and course offerings (e.g. African-American literature), shared her dissatisfaction about how administrative decisions at the building level sometimes put an end to some of her efforts. Ms. Molkera shared:

Some of my darkest days were when we had so many kids and parents emailing me saying why are the [African American literature] classes being cut [by administration]? That was probably the worst…How do you know this is a wanted need for a marginalized group of people, and yet you’re not holding it sacred? That baffles me.
Ms. Molkera was very clear, on multiple occasions, that racial equity work needed to be felt and experienced by students, on a daily basis, in school and in their classes. Whether that was by having more teachers of Color or more classes like African-American literature, Ms. Molkera believed racial equity was not just about adult learning and staff meetings, and she found school administration turned out to be a dissatisfying barrier.

Another example of participants’ dissatisfaction with their school and district’s racial equity work was when Ms. Alexander described the time when her district made a sweeping and formal decision to move away from using Singleton’s (2006/2014) *Courageous Conversations* and other previously structured approaches to racial equity work, and how she believed that decision stalled racial equity progress, and halted many educators’ commitment to racial equity learning and work. Ms. Alexander explained:

Now [after abandoning *Courageous Conversations*] it doesn't feel like anything is happening. There is an assumption that we should be grounded enough in equity work for the amount of time we've been doing it [using *Courageous Conversations*], that we should have those practices embedded in our classrooms, in our schools, in our parent community, in our operations, in our budgeting, in our hiring; that we should have enough racial equity experience to be able to sustain that, and that it should be self-sustaining. And it is not. It is not [emphasis added]. The moment that we didn't have to do racial equity PDs [professional developments], the moment everybody didn't have to go through racial equity onboarding PD, the moment there were not directives as far as how you work with *Courageous Conversations*, as soon as all those directives left, a lot of people lost interest.

I found this to be tragic, yet also somewhat predictable. As cited earlier in this chapter, Ms. Free also described two scenarios when she had seen racial equity work halted at the district level. The first instance was when leadership changed, and the second was in instances when the work did not “change the data” in ways that people (in power) hoped
and/or expected it should, that it then became at risk. Perhaps these were at play in Ms. Alexander’s district as well.

Ms. Alexander also detailed another instance of dissatisfaction where there was an opportunity to reopen a previously closed school in her district that would serve a predominantly Black student population, which is a rarity in many places in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest. I could tell this was a sore subject for Ms. Alexander, and that her vision for how that school opening should have happened was not how it played out. Ms. Alexander explained:

So with all this [racial equity] work that we did. With all this acknowledgement that Black students are being outperformed by White students and that race and zip code is an indicator of, or is a predictor of how a child will do. With knowing that there are lower expectations at some schools, and you know we have transportation issues, pollution issues, food issues, food insecurity issues. We ironed all that out. We brought all that to the table… [and when it came time to staff the reopened predominantly Black school] I feel like everybody who wanted to be there should have reapplied for their jobs. Because what we wound up with was some people who really don't want to be there, but they’re also too lazy to go find other jobs. We found people who want to be there but are racially incompetent, you know, not culturally responsive whatsoever. I just feel like we deserve, we as in Black and Brown students and Black and Brown families, we deserve the cream of the crop when it comes to educators. We should have tapped the best of the best of the best of the best of the best of the best educators. Proven track record educators to work with these kids. And not just have somebody come along from another school because they're a familiar face.

Ms. Alexander followed up by saying that she “got it,” meaning that she understood that there were contractual obligations from both the school district and union for staffing that were “airtight,” and that she understood them. She went on to explain that she had seen “freaking horror stories” of teachers being victims of administrative and district intimidation or retaliation, and so she understood and supported union and contractual protections. However, Ms. Alexander was also quick to clarify: “But in that case [the
reopening of the school with a predominantly Black student population] there should be an exception. You say you want to do better by Black and Brown kids, but are you really ready and willing to do what it takes?”

In a previous conversation that was already cited earlier in this chapter, Ms. Reed also spoke to the idea that schools that serve historically underserved students (whether that be racially or economically) deserve to have the “best” educators. I would like to share her words again, after Ms. Alexander’s example, to show the intersections and to highlight the hunger and need to address the issue of ensuring the presence and expectation of high quality, racially and culturally-competent teachers. Ms. Reed explained:

You think it's hard [teaching at a title school]? I choose to work at title schools… and I think that title deserves to have the best. Title should have teachers that are amazing. They should have some seasoning. They should know some tricks; they should be open and willing to better practices. And that's the problem. We're not willing to have that courageous conversation. We already know we can't talk about race, but what about this?

I will close this subsection with Ms. Alexander’s provocation, because I believe it is worth another consideration: “You say you want to do better by Black and Brown kids, but are you really ready and willing to do what it takes?”

**Barriers**

In this section I highlight the participants’ perceptions of any barriers towards more effective or productive racial equity work at their school/district, and how they would describe the barriers and perhaps reduce them. Table 8 includes a summary of select participants’ responses on perceived barriers to more effective racial equity work in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest.
Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>There are not enough educators of Color, nor funded positions in schools for community engagement, restorative justice, and equity and diversity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Free</td>
<td>People leading racial equity work are experiencing burnout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>Leaders are not well prepared to lead and model racial equity work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>Building administrators’ prioritize efficiency over equity; equity work gets labeled “political” and conservative community values can influence and stifle what and how teachers teach.</td>
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Note. Were there (or are there) any barriers for more effective or productive racial equity work at your school/district? If so, how would you describe the barriers? Do you have any ideas or strategies to reduce (some/any) of those barriers?

Ms. Molkera pointed out that she perceived a major barrier to racial equity work to be the lack of having more educators of Color and more formal, funded positions in schools to focus on and organize work towards more racial equity. Ms. Molkera explained:

[We need to] create a system that doesn't end up making one person have to fill in all the blanks, right? Ideally, in every district there is somebody who's placed in charge of equity and diversity, and positions for community engagement at [individual] buildings.

Ms. Molkera also shared that she believed such racial equity leadership and organizing roles should be prioritized for educators of Color and supported by state legislation. She then described how the positions could focus on some of the things that she did in addition to her full-time teaching job, like creating and connecting Black Student Unions (BSU) and other student clubs, and creating and connecting building liaisons and student and community leaders. Shortly after discussing the potential of such positions, Ms. Molkera excitedly listed off several current bills pending in her state’s legislature that
were in one way or another connected to racial equity in education. When I rewatched and transcribed this interview with Ms. Molkera, at the moment when she mentioned the need for such community organizer positions in schools and relevant state legislation, I remembered that I took the opportunity to try to at least acknowledge and praise her career of commitment(s) to racial equity work. I said, “You know, honestly, I have rarely come across anyone who can list out as many house bills in education as you,” I began. She danced in front of her screen when I said that, though I had much more to say than that. I went on:

It's like you have these two dimensions. You have Ms. Molkera the grinder, the I'm going to do this because it's important. Yeah, then you have Ms. Molkera the I'm going to go [to the state capitol] and push for this House bill because I want this to be legitimized and formalized and universal, right? You put it powerfully, you asked ‘how can we create a system where one person doesn't have to fill in the blanks?’ That's the question, right? Because it sounds like for a lot of your career, you were filling in the blanks, and you’ve described the toll it's taken on you.

Ms. Molkera quietly nodded, then laughed and said, “I'm currently on eight committees and I keep telling my boyfriend, if I go on another committee tell me to stop, OK?!?” Then she quickly got more serious and added, “Someone has to do it, and if I don't do it, I beg everybody around me to come, but people are taxed.” A career of advocating and fighting for more racial equity had surely taken a personal and professional toll on Ms. Molkera.

Similarly, Ms. Free also discussed the personal and professional toll of racial equity work as a barrier, and brought up the notion of burnout as well. “I definitely experience burnout myself,” Ms. Free stated frankly. Ms. Free then shared that when she stepped back from organizing work at her school around the movement for Black lives and justice, and how and why to address it in the classroom, that the work and
momentum stopped. “And so that's the part where I'm like ahhh, you know? White folks aren't really stepping up. But I know that it's the same White folks, they also are experiencing burnout.” Ms. Free’s thoughts on burnout were similar to what Gorski and Erakat (2019) found in their study of burnout in racial justice activists of Color, that while all activists (of many races) experience burnout to some extent from stressors like resistance, activists of Color “shoulder a greater load” of such stressors in addition to having to cope with stressors associated with the attitudes and behaviors of White activists (p. 801). I perceived that both Ms. Molkera and Ms. Free were committed to this work to the point of personal and professional exhaustion, and at times burnout, and that they also shared a fear that if they stopped, the work may stop, too.

Ms. Reed described the lack of strong leadership in racial equity work as a major barrier. Further, Ms. Reed explained that she felt there was not effective understanding of nor leadership around racial equity in her school and district, citing lacking leadership from both building and district administrators. Further, Ms. Reed took this question about barriers as an opportunity to once again make the case that teachers who possessed strong pedagogical skills and talents, and teachers who were validated, affirmed, supported and trained by administrators with such skills and high expectations, were a key towards achieving more racial equity. Ms. Reed also shared about talk being insufficient, and the centrality of transformative leadership and instruction. She explained:

Our school-wide impact does not make the words that we speak true. It doesn't matter if impact isn't involved. And I am trying to be polite, I don't want to just tear it down as I know it must be so hard to lead… Educational leaders can’t just have book knowledge though… I want to work for a leader who wants to create a school where every teacher wishes their child could go. Yeah, and that principal could walk in any classroom…and my plans better be to par because they can just
knock it out. You know, I think that would be power. And that would also show teachers like ‘I'm about something. Don't mess with me because I'm for real when I hold you to it, it’s because I can do it.’

Ms. Reed often spoke about the importance of on the ground, powerful classroom-based practices, and she wanted a building leader who could set that expectation and do it themselves, too.

At this point in our conversation, especially after Ms. Reed shared that educational leaders can’t just have “book knowledge,” I reminded Ms. Reed of our first conversation when she asked for my elevator speech on this project, and how she called me in and challenged me to be less intellectual and academic. I thanked her again for it, and shared a bit more of both my insecurities and growing wisdom, as well as some personal things that were happening in my life at the moment; some connected to this learning and project and some outside of it. I knew Ms. Reed would agree that we bring our whole selves to all that we do, and I owed that authenticity to her. Charmaz (2006) called the honesty and humanization between speakers and listeners in research and relationship-building as “reciprocity,” and argued that “ignoring such reciprocities not only weakens your chances of obtaining telling data but, moreover, dehumanizes your research participants - and yourself” (p. 110).

When I rewatched our Zoom conversation, at this particular moment, I noticed Ms. Reed listened very closely, and her eyes were locked on me through our screens. After I thanked her, she smiled, and snapped her fingers several times while nodding her head, and once again I could feel our relationship continuing to grow and deepen on the spot. “I appreciate you sharing a piece of your heart. I really appreciate it,” Ms. Reed
quietly said, almost in a whisper. “You’ve shared a lot with me, too” I reminded her humbly. This moment made me again think of what Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) referred to as “the space between” (p. 30) the dialogic spiral of speaking and listening - which was discussed in chapter three - more specifically the creation of reciprocal trust through conversation and relationship building that ultimately aids in learning and connecting (p. 41). These moments mattered.

Similar to Ms. Reed, Mr. Brill also spoke to building administration as a barrier. Further, Mr. Brill shared his perception that administrators often prioritized standardized test scores and other traditional student achievement metrics as taking precedence to deeper equity work, and the additional complexity of having predominantly White leadership. He shared:

So what I have noticed is admin[istrators] don't look at teachers in the same way that teachers look at students. They’re rarely concerned with teachers, what we're doing, how we're feeling, the work that we want to be doing. So I think that that's definitely a barrier, especially as we have these White administrators who don't share the same cultural experiences as our teachers of Color who are outspoken about the [racial equity] work that needs to be done.

Mr. Brill then shared a critique on school leaders who take an efficiency-based approach to leadership in general. He explained:

Their [administrators] goal has never been equity. It's efficiency. Like, ‘I have a school to run. I have a lot of things on my plate. I have to look at everything from this macro view. I don't necessarily have time or the energy or the resources to worry about things like equity. It's not that it's not important, it's just a very low priority that doesn't necessarily give us the output that we want.’

Mr. Brill’s critique is a worthy one, and connects deeply to the section in chapter one on historical precedents in U.S. public education and the role of neoliberalism, and what can
be lost when we prioritize over-standardization and measurement and quantification of our efforts and aims.

Finally, Mr. Brill described an additional barrier towards more effective racial equity work as evidenced by the role of national and state politics, as well as local community politics in schools. Mr. Brill explained: “While like I totally agree that it [racial justice work] is political, I mean, *everything* [emphasis added] is political.” Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) would agree, and asserted “If you are a teacher, you are in a super-political position” (p. 17). Whether it is the socialization of students, making decisions on what to teach or not, or even modeling how to make decisions on how to best live together with shared values and beliefs, teaching is inherently political (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022). More specifically, Mr. Brill went on to detail his frustration that he felt both the current racial justice movement for Black lives and justice, and even critical race scholarship in general, were being unfairly and incorrectly labeled as political and divisive, and therefore dismissed and lumped into the notion and thinking that, “there's no room for that in public education, right?” Mr. Brill also detailed the complexity of community politics and values and how they can impact a school’s commitment to racial equity work. For example, he shared a unique situation in which he found himself very dissatisfied that involved working in a community where many teachers personally resided. Having teachers teach in the community they live in “is absolutely great,” he noted, but also served as a potentially tricky barrier to racial equity work, too. Mr. Brill explained his current situation:

  It's a pretty conservative community, so [teachers and schools can] take the values of their community and that influences what happens in the school. You know,
teachers can feel that they represent the interests of their neighbors, right? So when there are resistors to this work [racial equity], they feel legitimized because they think that they have an ear to the ground. Like, ‘I know what the people want, so we're going to push this agenda in school. Our community isn't ready for these conversations, so we can't do them. So let's not.’

That said, what could the role(s) and impact(s) of local politics be regarding school-based racial equity work? Says whom and for whom? Clearly there were many complexities and therefore barriers, institutionally and also throughout the community, that could help or hinder work in the realm of racial equity.

Summary

In conclusion, while the variety and depth of the participants’ ideas and experiences speak for themselves, there did seem to be a common thread that I believe was woven throughout them all: hierarchical structures had the power to shift institutional practices and commitments to racial equity for the better or worse in deeply powerful and profound ways. Many of the participants spoke of the need to reconceptualize and redistribute how we approach and sustain racial equity work in everything from determining individual and collective responsibility, needs, and accountability. Additionally, many participants saw a more recent shift in or around the year 2020 in their school and district work relating to racial equity, which will be discussed more in the following section which addressed the movement for Black lives and justice and the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the role of norms and protocols to navigate racial equity work showed important promise in one participant’s experience but was rare in the other six participants’ experiences. Data was a tool that many participants saw having important potential in racial equity work, including more qualitative data from students.
and communities, though many participants still shared a hesitation and weariness because of deficit-based data practices in the past. Finally, the participants experienced a wide variety of ups and downs and barriers in their school and district racial equity work, many of those experiences unique and contextualized, many others with similar threads of reluctance in predominantly White institutional hierarchies.
Theme 2: Living and Learning, Seizing and Leading in Historical Times: The Movement for Black Lives and Justice and COVID-19’s Impact on K-12 Racial Equity Work

As any research, learning, and living is, this project was situated in a specific moment in time, place, and history. When I initially reached out to participants about this project, it was March of 2021, a time when both the COVID-19 pandemic and racism individually and collectively continued to disrupt and end lives, more disproportionately harming Black, Indigenous, and other people and communities of Color. History was happening in front of our eyes and screens. During March and April of 2021, when I conducted the majority of the interviews, K-12 educators in the Pacific Northwest had been in comprehensive distance (virtual) learning for about six months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. Additionally during this time, the movement for Black lives and justice was at a crossroads as Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis Police officer who was found guilty of murder and manslaughter in the death of George Floyd, was about to begin his trial in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Chauvin’s trial lasted weeks, and on April 12, 2021, I received a text message from one of the participants who I was supposed to connect with that day. The text message read:

hey Brad, i am feel [sic] overwhelmed with the trial of Derek Chauvin, the release of the body cam[era] footage of the police killing of Daunte Wright and more news surfacing about Black Army officer held at gunpoint. I am trying to be more aware of my energy balloon and I think our scheduled interview will only add to that stress. Can we reschedule for tomorrow?

I share this to illustrate a clear, durable reality: The events of and movement for Black lives and justice was taking a deep toll on the participants in real and raw ways. Historically speaking, the movement for Black lives and justice has been called the
largest movement in U.S. history as it involved between an estimated 15 million to 26 million people in the U.S. alone, with more than 40 percent of counties across the U.S. having had racial justice related protests (Buchanan et al., 2020). Paired with the immeasurable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic - the most devastating pandemic in modern history - the historical and emotional immensity of the specific moment in time, place, and history that this project took place during, cannot be understated.

Furthermore, I would be remiss not to mention that the U.S. Capitol had been stormed on January 6, 2021, just six weeks before my initial communication with participants. Images of a predominantly White mob of insurrectionists were still flooding the media every day, including haunting images of nooses on the streets and the Confederate flag being flown inside the halls of the U.S. Capitol, something that not even Confederate soldiers were able to achieve during the U.S. Civil War (Cramer, 2021). Additionally, when analyzing the over 800 people arrested as a result of the January 6 insurrection, the most insurrectionists came from U.S. counties with the greatest decline in the non-Hispanic White population; put differently “they [insurrectionists] came from places that used to be almost all White and aren’t anymore” (Dirks, 2022, para. 43). During the time I initially reached out to most of the project participants, there were still daily and dangerous echoes and accusations of a “stolen election” threatening the democratic voting process and structure of the United States, with 17 states having passed 28 laws making it harder to vote (Alas, 2021). It is also worth noting that amidst all that was happening in early 2021, including unprecedented and historically significant voter
suppression, issues of race and racism were central. The Brennan Center, a nonpartisan law and policy institute, asserted:

Restrictive [voting] laws from 2011 were enacted after the 2010 elections brought a significant shift in political control over state-houses – and as the country confronted backlash to the election of its first Black president. Today’s [2021] attacks on the vote come from similar sources: the racist voter fraud allegations behind the Big Lie [former President’s Trump’s repeated false claims] and a desire to prevent future elections from achieving the historic turnout seen in 2020. (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021)

Put differently, the U.S. was in a moment of reckoning, socially, politically, educationally, and democratically, with race and racial under- and overtones present each step of the way; and this project went on, ambitiously and suspiciously looking how schools could and should work towards more racial equity. My gratitude for the participants - before, now and forever - for their brilliance and resilience, for their commitment to education and equity, and their time and wisdom shared with me, is hard to express.

In regard to this project specifically, I believed it was important to intentionally and tangibly address the historical reality and implications of the times. After all, future generations will study the years 2020 and 2021, which will be remembered in long, hefty chapters of history texts that will likely continue to be the subject of debate and varied interpretations for decades, centuries, maybe millennia. That said, I asked the project participants about these historical events, primarily the racial justice movement and COVID-19 pandemic, and how, if at all, these key historical events impacted their school’s racial equity work or efforts. The questions were: Throughout your experiences in school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity, what changes and/or major
differences have you noticed over time? Can you share any examples? How has your school’s work been impacted, if at all, by the recent evolution of and upsurge in the movement for racial justice and Black lives? Or by the COVID-19 pandemic? Or any other recent events?

For this section, I will not be using a table to highlight participants’ responses, but instead will begin with how the project participants perceived COVID-19 and its impacts. I will then move into the movement for Black lives and justice by highlighting two very personal reflections from two project participants – that I will write about through additional pseudonyms as further anonymity measure - about their personal and professional experiences. Additionally, I call attention to the intersectional nature of both of these historical events, as well highlight some participants’ critiques on the role and shortcoming of social emotional learning, and their perceptions of hopeful lessons learned for the future.

The Ongoing and Evolving Movement for Black Lives and Justice

In this section, I highlight how the participants perceived the impact of the racial justice movement on their school and district’s efforts towards more racial equity. I also highlight two participants’ anonymous reflections on the movement’s impacts on their personal and professional lives.

There are many things to consider when thinking about the ongoing impact of the dynamic and perpetually shifting racial justice movement for Black lives and justice in the U.S., especially regarding school-based racial equity work. Right off the bat, many participants shared how they believed the racial justice movement immediately impacted
school based racial equity work. For example, Mr. Brill shared “I think the summer's events [mostly the racial justice protests during the summer of 2020] sped up the timeline as far as where districts are at [with racial equity work] or where they feel like they need to go by at least five years. BLM [Black Lives Matter] really forced our hand.” Mr. Douglass also noted an increased amount of time allocated to focus on race and racism at both school and district meetings, as well as during professional development events. Additionally, Ms. Molkera shared that “Black Lives Matter happens and all of a sudden people cared more, BLM did put us under the microscope. It put schools under a microscope and now it gives people permission to bring real changes.”

In short, many participants spoke on the seemingly reactive and expedited sense of urgency for racial equity work in their schools and districts following the spring and summer of 2020.

In an effort to more deeply consider the impacts of the racial justice movement on both racial equity work in schools and on the participants themselves, I would like to highlight two specific and very personal experiences that two project participants shared with me. Because both of these incidents came with both personal and professional ramifications and harm, and because the anonymity and well-being of the participants is of the utmost importance in this project, I will temporarily refer to the participants who shared them as Educator A and Educator B. I believe these two experiences are very important to consider and reflect on as they are both indicative of the toll, let alone the hurt that some of the participants experienced regarding how their schools and/or districts responded to this moment in history, and the importance of Black and Black biracial
educators feeling seen, heard, validated, and affirmed as educators, but much more importantly as human beings.

Educator A detailed how being a Black teacher during this time in history impacted them on a personal and professional level. Educator A shared about the 2020-2021 school year:

This year in particular has been very, let's just use the word traumatic. I felt like after coming off of the summer’s events [2020], we had to come back to school and address it [racial justice] right away, and that wasn't what's happening.

Educator A went on to share how they approached people in positions of power at the school and district level, multiple times, to inquire about a more formal approach and commitment to address the racial justice movement, both collectively as a building staff and with the school district in regard to professional learning. Despite Educator A’s efforts, the administrative response was lacking and little was done. The school district itself put out a statement, as many districts in the Pacific Northwest did in the summer of 2020, and Educator A recalled feeling “seen and heard,” at least from a larger, district level. However, Educator A did not feel “seen and heard” as much from their school level. Educator A then sent an email to their colleagues sharing their personal and professional thoughts about how this moment was an opportunity for them to teach and cultivate love in their classes and community. The response from Educator A’s building administrators did not address the issues at hand, but instead, noted that teachers should reach out to administrators in advance of sending whole staff emails. Educator A shared:

I was being silenced as a teacher of Color… It got to a point where I couldn't do it anymore. I just felt like I was going into staff meetings or going into school, just leaving every part of what made me me [emphasis added] at the door.
Additional circumstances at the school site, including a racist act by a White colleague that went unaddressed by the school administration, led to Educator A feeling deeply hurt and needing to address the issue directly. Educator A went on:

In true restorative justice nature, I needed to face my perpetrator [administrator]. I needed to look them in the eye and be like, this is the trauma that I'm going through. This is the hurt that I feel, and this is why I feel this way.

Educator A explained that since this instance, they believe, “It has 100% affected my relationship with my administration. Now it's very much like walking on eggshells.”

Educator A also detailed the impact on their personal life and relationships, and how they had to talk to their partner about the impact of all of this. “We [Educator A’s partner and them] had an honest conversation. Like, if I lose my job, are we going to be OK? Like that was a legitimate conversation.”

Educator A’s experience highlights the risk of being a brave educator of Color who chose to speak up with their staff and administration about seizing this historic moment and to lean into racial equity work, together, with and alongside their students and community. Educator A added that they often believe their district has the right intentions, but that didn’t always translate to the schools.

The [racial equity] message is being lost in translation. The district has the right framework. I believe they really do have the right leadership and the right intentions, but through the bureaucracy of the district, it just doesn't get implemented at the site level. There's no accountability. There are very few administrators of Color to hold their White admin[istrator] counterparts accountable. So it's just, it seems like one thing after another.

This was just one experience, of many, that Educator A and the other project participants shared about the personal and professional risk of speaking up and speaking out on issues of race and racism.
Another example is from a project participant that I will temporarily refer to as Educator B. Educator B also spoke of being personally and professionally impacted by their school and district’s lack of a substantive response regarding the racial justice movement for Black lives and justice. Educator B explained, “Black lives Matter is within the context of the larger civil rights, the ongoing civil rights movement in this country. Like that's our responsibility as educators. To teach it.” It should also be noted that Educator B was no stranger to teaching critically about the Black Lives Matter movement dating back to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer in 2013. Further, Educator B shared with me a specific school experience of theirs related to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014:

Right after Ferguson... all of these White kids are watching what's happening in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Ferguson, and what do they know about Black people? What do they know about generations of economic disinvestment? What do they know about over-policing? Nothing. That's why the education is important, to help them understand their world. So you know that was kind of the mission or the purpose, the vision of educating around Black Lives Matter so that they understood, and that meant separate from the media, right? So anyway, it was obviously you know very personally traumatic for me to watch this all happen as a Black person.

During that time and up until recently, Educator B encountered many barriers regarding how they engaged with their students in learning about racial justice and the current movement. Educator B listed barriers that included not feeling supported by colleagues and administrators, of district employees or community members being against their students’ work and projects being shared, and even a lack of acknowledgment that what they were doing was important. Educator B shared that as a result they felt a sense of isolation, even more so as a Black educator in a predominantly White community and
region. Educator B shared, “After Ferguson, then slowly [the district support for Black lives and racial justice] backed off, got scared, got intimidated, whatever, right? The cop voices, the conservative voices, you know, the white fragility carried the day.” Educator B meant that previous indications of support for their work around racial justice all of a sudden began to dim and fade. That was until the events of May 25, 2020 occurred; when George Floyd took his final breaths at the intersection of Chicago Avenue and 38th Street in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Educator B went on:

> After George Floyd's murder, and all that happened in June [referring to the widespread protests of 2020], and the districts are like, ‘Oh, maybe we'll finally say Black Lives Matter. So maybe we'll start these reading groups or whatever…. Maybe we’ll recognize that we're saying Black Lives Matter as a district,’ but what does that actually look like when we do? When we value the Black and Brown staff in our system?

Educator B went on to describe several events that, although I won’t describe them in detail, I can summarize by stating that Educator B experienced backlash and retaliation from their predominantly White colleagues, administration, and district. Educator B eventually began to look for different jobs outside of the region because they felt they were being “back of the bussed,” a term Educator B used to describe how they were treated and how they felt ignored and dismissed. Educator B talked about the politics involved, but also the pain of inaction and silence with district-wide leadership, which in this case and in many others in the Pacific Northwest, meant predominantly White administrators and leadership. Educator B explained:

> [There is a] lack of understanding, and there is fragility of White leadership who don't, who aren't willing to just say: ‘Hey, I'm gonna take this stance. And I'm going to take the risk of what that means. I'm going to put myself out there because I get it that I am the beneficiary of blah blah blah blah. And this is the right thing to do. And you know, I'm going to depart from business as usual.’
Educator B then quoted a phrase that they had heard at a conference to help bring words to their thinking: “It's the gravitational pull of white supremacy,” Educator B shared while looking off to the side, “and it's very heavy, and it’s the default.” To which I replied, “It’s the legacy.” “Yeah,” Educator B replied nodding their head, “It's the legacy and it's the procedures and norms of this system.” While I could only conceptualize the legacy of racial inequality and the impacts of racism from a cognitive, intellectual, and vicarious stance, Educator B was living it, feeling it, and incensed by it.

I share these experiences of Educator A and B, or slivers of them, in the hopes that the humanity of the participants takes precedence over all else. I don’t share these experiences to ignite tired old debates about what is political and what’s not, or to consider what is “appropriate” to talk about regarding race and racism in K-12 schools or staff meetings. Instead, I share these experiences that were shared with me in hopes of sparking honest and critical reflection on what it means to be committed to racial equity, as an educator and human being, and to consider if we all, especially majoritarian White educators and those in positions of power, are willing to do what it takes to stand with and alongside Black and Brown students, staff, and communities; to see and hear their calls, and to be better and do better in the collective call for justice and for change.

It’s also important to note and consider the intersections of COVID-19 and the racial justice movement. While COVID-19 and its impacts will be specifically addressed in the next section, I’d like to highlight something Ms. Free shared with me. Further, Ms. Free perceived an increase in the amount of learning about race and racism and information that people had access to when they were homebound and working from
home during COVID-19, though she had trepidation about the sustainability of such a rapidly increased interest in the racial justice movement. More specifically, Ms. Free shared:

On one hand, you know, more people were paying attention [to the racial justice movement], right? Because we're all home taking it all in, all of this information online. And so people are like, ‘Oh yeah, book clubs, this, that, the other, you know, I'm gonna get busy on this, right? Get my equity on’ [she laughed]. And then, you know, and then nothing [emphasis added].

Interestingly, the Google Trends data from the year 2020 showed that people in the U.S. were searching for information on the movement for Black lives and justice at unprecedented levels. For example, in June 2020, "what is systematic racism" reached an all-time high number of searches on Google, "protests near me" was searched in all 50 U.S. states for the first time in Google’s history, and “How to help Black Lives Matter” was the second most popular “how to help” search of the year (McLellan, 2020).

Needless to say, many people across the U.S. were at least thinking about racial justice, though as Ms. Free perceived it in her school and district, the interest – and certainly action - not only waned, but halted over time.

Ms. Free also described how she was waiting for something – anything – from district leadership during COVID-19, especially to staff and employees of Color who were disproportionately affected. Ms. Free explained:

My frustration, since last June [2020] is that I haven't seen any meaningful outreach come from our district to staff and employees of Color who are impacted differently by COVID-19, and by the other pandemic of racism. And you know, all of these declarations of being committed to equity and Black lives are in word only, right, but not in deed at all.
Not only was this disappointing to hear, but it also made me think back to when Ms. Reed shared earlier, “Equity has to be a living and breathing thing… And we have to hold ourselves to it; the real devil is to do it.”

**The COVID-19 Pandemic**

In this section, I will detail how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants and their school or district’s racial equity work.

Many of the participants were fairly blunt about how they felt that COVID-19 served as a detour to racial equity work. More specifically, many participants shared how they believed COVID-19 monopolized the energy and attention of nearly all district efforts, drawing attention away from anything else, including racial equity work, towards a more logistical, operational, and structural response based solely on virtual distance learning. For example, Mr. Brill shared:

District leaders are using COVID-19 as an excuse that teachers are overwhelmed. I've heard that on many, many different levels. Like, ‘teachers haven't taught this way [remotely] before, they're learning how to do new things, and that becomes the priority rather than the racial justice work that had been started. It's like, well, let's just put a pause on that, we need to figure out all these logistical things, going back to that structural functionalist epistemology, like we need to be efficient. We need to make sure that, this, this, and this happens. So equity is just not a priority right now because we're doing things that we haven't done before.’

Ms. Free also described a very similar perception when she explained:

I feel like COVID-19 has offered a very convenient detour for peoples’ energy because pivoting into distance learning was so demanding… it's all been just kind of responding to the circumstances and comprehensive distance learning and then hybrid [learning divided between home and the school] and so on. And so, I feel like COVID-19 has put a damper on the momentum that was created last summer [referring to 2020 and racial equity work].
Ms. Free went on to acknowledge the immensity of the shift to virtual and distance learning, but how disappointing it was that an emphasis on COVID-19 came at the expense of racial equity efforts. Ms. Free shared, “I want to be generous; I mean, I understand that people [referring to teachers during the COVID-19 school closures] are in survival mode. But, you know, folks of Color literally [emphasis added] are in survival mode.” It’s worth noting that Ms. Free previously described racism as a pandemic as well.

Ms. Alexander had a different experience than many of the other participants in regard to COVID-19 and the district response, as well as the movement for Black lives and justice. She detailed how she found district leadership’s efforts to be “decent.” Ms. Alexander explained:

[District leadership] did a decent job of being cognizant and making everybody else cognizant of how comprehensive distance learning was going to identify and even widen and further some of the gaps between our students of Color and White students, and so now not only is it a performance gap, there is an opportunity gap, there’s an income gap, there’s a parental guidance gap. They [gaps] widened and [district leadership] acknowledged that and there were lots of moves that they made in lots of directives that addressed some of those gaps, you know with food and nutrition services, and making sure every kid has a device and a hotspot with Wi-Fi, with limited in-person instruction only being limited to the students who needed it the most. And so, there were some moves that they made and some stances that they took publicly to show support not just for Black Lives Matter, but making sure the Black lives really [emphasis added] mattered to our students as a whole, by giving them what they need.

This was an interesting juxtaposition to what Ms. Free had shared earlier when she said:

“...all of these declarations of being committed to equity and Black lives are in word only, right, but not in deed at all.” Ms. Alexander had just listed out several examples (i.e. in-person instruction only being limited to the students who needed it the most) of more
equitable and race-conscious decision-making that meant, as she put it, “making sure the Black lives really mattered… by giving them what they need.”

Additionally, Ms. Alexander outlined another district-wide effort in response to COVID-19 that had implications on racial equity, one which I found very encouraging. Further, Ms. Alexander explained that a written curriculum and toolkit of curricular guidance and considerations was put together to support teachers in teaching in these historical times with an emphasis on student empowerment, resilience, and civic engagement. The toolkit outlined a reimagined vision for the district with students at the center, and it described a process of co-constructing that new vision that included students, families, educators, district staff, and civic, business, community, and philanthropic leaders throughout the region. Additionally, the toolkit explicitly named racial equity at the heart of the vision, and emphasized that students must understand how communities have been impacted by racial injustice to be able to interrupt things that enable injustice. The toolkit also referenced the notion of recognizing and deconstructing the dominant narrative. Additionally, the toolkit also included lesson plans and resources for K-12 teachers, professional development opportunities, student and family supports, guidelines for political speech, hate speech protocols, and staff supports as well. After Ms. Alexander shared about this welcomed example of district leadership, she added: “Now, the way it's carried out, it still varies from school to school, because different schools have different cultures. But on a grand scale, I feel like they [district leadership] did a decent job of addressing it [the current political and social times].”
While Ms. Alexander’s examples were certainly encouraging, especially when comparing her district’s response to the other participants’ experiences, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat conflicted. I also thought more deeply about Ms. Alexander’s word choice when she described the district response as “decent.” What stopped her from saying the response was “good,” or even “great”? Perhaps she too wondered why these ideas, supports, and declarations weren’t already in place, as the aforementioned racial and economic injustices have been around for centuries. While I do believe that yes, acknowledging and celebrating progress and justice are immensely important, the more critical side of me also wonders: what took so long? And what other things are currently in the state of “taking too long,” awaiting some other kind of catalyzing, catastrophic event to spur more widespread consciousness and action? I think of massive environmental problems, the climate crises, deep and foreseeably violent political divisions. What implications do these have on our hearts and minds, as both educators and human beings? And what is the role of K-12 schools amidst them all?

Mr. James also detailed how he saw the connections between COVID-19 and racial justice and how the combination of the two events provided a strong window of opportunity to reimagine education as a whole. Mr. James explained:

COVID-19 has really highlighted inequities. When you talk about who is and isn't an essential worker, access to healthcare, access to information, and education about how the virus is spreading. Yeah, those all really affected our communities of Color, especially our migrant communities, our African American communities, especially in the South… And those social and racial inequities trickle down to our kids.

Mr. James went on to share that perhaps right now [2021 at the time of his comment] was the perfect time to truly think about reconstructing and (re)envisioning school in general.
Further, he shared how COVID-19 illustrated what he described as “other competing factors in life beyond what happened in the classroom which are pulling out kids away from school,” such as the disproportionate impacts that COVID-19 had on communities of Color who still had to work during the pandemic to pay the bills, and those students who had to either work and/or take care of younger siblings during the pandemic and thus were limited in their time and capacity to engage with virtual learning.

Further, Mr. James described what he perceived to be an opportunity for a needed reckoning with how we engage communities in a “cultural sense.” He explained:

I think there is disengagement that we have to reckon with in a cultural sense. In recovering from the pandemic, we really need to look at how we engage our communities both in the classroom and beyond. So in the classroom, in the hallways, and in the community, what does our engagement look like? And then we need to look at how we are re-thinking the design of schools to be more equitable, to be more accessible... I think this is a prime opportunity to rethink schools. And while I’m highlighting inequities, it gives me hope that we are rethinking what this structure looks like, to be more equitable in the future.

Mr. James’s sentiments made me think back to how he described the need for more “authentic” and “panoramic” data on the experiences of students and communities of Color.

While Mr. James believed that this moment in history was an opportune time to evolve our educational systems and structures in an educational, racial, and historical sense, some participants seemed a bit less optimistic and a bit more critically suspicious.

For example, Mr. Brill shared:

All I heard in the beginning of this [COVID-19] was ‘Oh, this is going to be such an amazing time to reinvent education and to practice different pedagogical approaches that we wanted to but didn’t know how to do before,’ and really like breaking the wheel. None of that has happened. If anything, it has just perpetuated more inequality. And now that we’re going back to school it's gonna be back to
normal. It's gonna be sit here, take your notes, take your test. We don't care about you as people or as individuals, or [see you] as students as experts. Like, you're a kid in my class who is either gonna pass or fail. And then you're gonna move on.

Ultimately, the lessons, or lack thereof, that K-12 public education learned (and is still learning) from COVID-19 will certainly be strong indicators of the direction and priorities of public education as we move more deeply into the twenty-first century.

**On COVID-19, Racial Justice, and Social Emotional Learning**

In this section, I highlight specific instances where two participants, Mr. Brill and Ms. Free, critiqued the notion and aims of social emotional learning (SEL) as they related to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement. More specifically, Mr. Brill and Ms. Free openly problematized the fact that race and racialized experiences were often left out of SEL initiatives and planning.

Mr. Brill often spoke about what he perceived as the watering-down and whitewashing of much social justice and equity work in general, not only in scope and aim, but also in the exclusion of race-consciousness altogether. As previously cited, he critiqued his school district’s more general equity policy that didn’t name race or racism, and here he began to more deeply expand on the idea of excluding race and the implications of doing so. Mr. Brill explained:

Racial justice has morphed into multiculturalism. It's morphed into diversity, or social emotional learning, whatever you wanna call it. It's not centered in what the original intent was, and I think COVID-19 has only perpetuated that because we're now focused on the social emotional part, but that's impossible to do because we're missing the racial component. So, it's counterproductive in my opinion. We can't think that we're getting through to students when we're clearly omitting a huge portion of who they are as individuals [their race]. Like, I can't talk to you about your trauma because I'm not talking about race. What is that? It's a very surface level conversation and I'm sure students are confused because they're not really understanding how this fits into how they're actually feeling.
Mr. Brill often showed concern and advocacy for the students of Color who he felt were not equipped to process and deal with what they were seeing and hearing about both COVID-19 and its disproportionate effect on communities of Color, as well as his what they were seeing and hearing about Black Lives Matter and the racial justice movement in a very White, conservative community. Mr. Brill also shared his concern that many of his White colleagues weren’t addressing the racial justice movement in their classrooms.

While I always knew that Mr. Brill was an exceptional educator and person, it was when he intentionally decentered himself and talked about his students’ needs, especially his students of Color, that I believe his heart and character truly shined. For example, Mr. Brill shared:

All of this advocating that I'm doing, all of this pushing and disrupting of the status quo, is for my students. It's not about me. Like at the end of the day, I can come home and I can feel however I feel, but I at least have the capability of trying to use stress management and self-care. These middle school students don't yet have those skills, right? Their trauma is only going to be compounded and so much more magnified because they don't yet have the skills to be able to process what this all really means or even who they are… They're [students] going to a [nearly] all White school with all White teachers who aren't addressing the issue at hand. I just wonder, what kind of social emotional help are we really providing them?

Later on, Mr. Brill went back to the notion of racial hypervisibility and invisible needs, but through a student lens.

It goes back to what we talked about really early on, they [students of Color] are hypervisible but their needs are invisible, and that's what's happening. Here our students are crying out that they need to have spaces that they can process their trauma, and we're saying no, no, that'll come later.

Mr. Brill created the space in his classroom to talk about Black lives and the movement for racial justice, and as a result had some White families complain that he was
“indoctrinating” their students. He shared, “What I have noticed is the teachers who are more geared towards racial equity are kind of left hanging out by themselves and are not always supported from their colleagues or their admin[istrators],” Mr. Brill shared knowingly. Mr. Brill’s critique of the missed opportunity and misguided prioritization of SEL made me (again) think back to some of the questions hovering beneath and across this entire project: Who is racial equity work for? Says whom? Whose responsibility is racial equity work? Additionally, as Mr. Brill illuminated yet again, who and what is hypervisible, and who and what is invisible? Says whom and for whom?

Ms. Free also shared how she felt it was interesting, and even funny, to notice what topics and ideas emerged as hot-button issues in these trying times. While Ms. Free expressed her personal desire to see students’ mental health and their racialized experiences as priorities, she found that political theater and fabricated emergencies were far more commonly discussed. More specifically, Ms. Free shared:

I think we’re still having dumb conversations [laughs] about critical race theory, and “learning loss” [she laughed again and used air quotes with her fingers when she said learning loss). You know, like wait a second, don’t we know more after this year [2020-2021]? Aren’t we centering, even maybe a little bit more, students’ lives? Their mental health? There are these other pieces of the puzzle that social emotional learning, I guess whatever you wanna call it, has to be in place for our students to be healthy. And health is so many different things, right? And a piece of health is a cultural thing, community care, and connectedness, so it feels like we should know more than we did a year ago about those pieces.

Ms. Free believed that one of the most important lessons from COVID-19 and the racial justice movement was that students’ needs for safety, survival, validation, and affirmation mattered, and that they should always come first. In her book We want to do more than

Although no one person is equipped or has the right to speak for millions, particularly on the issues of race and racism, there is one thing that I know with everything I am: we who are dark want to matter and live, not just to survive but to thrive” (p. 1).

While I agree that no one person is equipped or has the right to speak for millions, particularly on the issues of race and racism, there is one thing that I know with everything I am: we (especially educators) who are White need to humbly listen and revere people of Color’s lived experiences and wisdom, particularly on the issues of race and racism. And we need to follow that listening with informed, responsive action.

**Hopeful Lessons Learned**

In this section I summarize several positive takeaways and/or lessons learned that two participants perceived as being products of the racial justice movement and COVID-19 pandemic, and I briefly note the implications such lessons could have on school-based racial equity work.

I was consistently impressed with how the participants so clearly and passionately critiqued and analyzed different aspects of the educational system while simultaneously offering critical hope for the future. For example, after detailing how Mr. Brill and Ms. Free were discouraged by aspects of how COVID-19 and the movement for Black lives impacted racial equity work, they also found moments of hope and promise.

For example, Ms. Free and Mr. Brill both spoke to the immense capacity building and potential for reimagined collaboration and collaborative action with educators’ new technological skills and proficiencies. Ms. Free explained that a lot of awareness-building
had happened in 2020 and 2021, and she found that “encouraging.” She also shared that, “Our collaboration in Zoom-Landia and Google-Land has provided some mechanisms to build some shared understanding that I think we weren't doing before. And you know, that too has helped the evolution of the conversation [about race and equity].”

Similarly, Mr. Brill shared a story warmly about how impressed he was with his former high school students with whom he was still in touch via social media. Mr. Brill proudly recalled seeing how involved and civically engaged his former students were in 2020 and 2021, whether they were taking to the streets and participating in non-violent protests, organizing rallies, or helping get people registered to vote. Mr. Brill reflected:

And here I am, and I had a moment of like, you're a hypocrite! How can you tell students that this is what needs to happen and you're not doing enough yourself? So just to see how active this younger generation is, it blows my mind. I feel like we don't give them enough credit.

Mr. Brill then laughed and said “just a quick story” - which was a common occurrence in our talks - and then recalled the time in June 2020 when young people on social media claimed to make a significant number of false ticket reservations to a Tulsa, Oklahoma rally held by then President Donald Trump. Mr. Brill shared with a laugh:

I think of things like, you know all those TikTok kids that registered for that Trump rally? What a great way to use power, really. And I was so blown away by that. Here I am as a teacher like damn, I hate TikTok, it's the worst, and then to see students use it in such a powerful mechanism for change. That's really what it's all about and that's why this work is so important. These kids already are experts in their own ways. If we can just continue to give them the guidance or provide them with the model of what it looks like to be a social justice advocate, or someone who fights for racial justice? Oh my God. Like the future that we'll have is going to be so much better than the present that we're living in.
I too have found humor, and more importantly creativity and hope through witnessing the actions and questions of young people today who show a steadfast critical curiosity and simultaneous refusal to accept things the way they are.

Finally, both Ms. Free and Mr. Brill shared that the leadership of their local chapters and state teacher’s union during 2020-2021 had been both impactful and promising. Ms. Free shared that union leadership, especially those with experience in organizing, put together educator rallies and marches in support of Black lives and justice and also were working to ensure that educators of Color had an important role and place at the table for all of their work and decision-making. Similarly, Mr. Brill shared that his local union expressed “outright support” of the movement for Black lives and justice and made efforts to bring educators of Color to the decision-making table as well, also adding that his union planned and facilitated weekly virtual affinity groups for educators of Color. Another aspect of union support that Mr. Brill found both affirming and empowering was the union’s support for teachers who were teaching about topics involving race, including the current racial justice movement for Black lives. Mr. Brill explained:

Union leadership has really allowed other teachers to feel comfortable in doing the work because at the end of the day they know that they have the support of the Union and job protection.

Mr. Brill had previously shared how he felt “teachers who are more geared towards racial equity are kind of left hanging out by themselves” by many colleagues and administrators, and so he perceived the support of the union as deeply important. Further, Mr. Brill shared:
[Union support] is a huge, huge load not just off of my shoulders as a Black educator, but I think for a lot of my White colleagues as well who want to do the work but aren't sure what the repercussions are going to be.

It should also be noted that amidst the current social and political times in 2021, two national teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA), both pledged to “defend their members against any backlash over how they teach about the nation’s complicated history with race and racism” (Will, 2021, para. 1).

More generally speaking, Ms. Free also shared that she perceived there to be more districtwide conversations about involving building and district leadership more formally in racial equity work, and that she believed that was a good thing. Ms. Free explained, “There's lots of conversation about equity being systematized and institutionalized in our leadership plans… and that racial equity work is the responsibility of everyone in the system. I feel like it's starting to shift.” Clearly this would be a very welcomed shift.

**Summary**

In this section, the participants shared how the racial justice movement for Black lives and justice and the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their school’s racial equity work or efforts. In short, many participants felt that the racial justice movement expedited their school and district’s stance and attempts at addressing issues of race and racism, however that did not always result in productive, tangible actions or outcomes. Two anonymous participants shared how personally and emotionally painful their experiences were during the ongoing movement for Black lives and justice, as they felt silenced, ignored, and unsupported both personally and professionally. Additionally, many participants shared
how the COVID-19 pandemic led to a loss of momentum and focus on issues regarding racial equity and more of a focus on distance learning and adapting to new technological realities. However, one participant shared tangible initiatives that her district focused on during COVID-19 school closures that addressed both racial and economic disparities. Additionally, two participants critiqued a race-neutral, arguably race-dysconscious approach to social emotional learning and advocated for more of an honest inclusion of racialized experiences and trauma. Finally, this section concluded with hopeful lessons learned through both the pandemic and racial justice movement which included the participants’ hopes for more awareness-building, more technological capacity for learning and connecting, a nod to youth-led social and political action, appreciation for local union leadership and efforts, and seeds for more structural change at large.
Theme 3: The Many (White) Elephants in the (Class)Room: The Perceived and Varying Roles, Impacts, and Potential of Majoritarian White Educators in K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Pacific Northwest

This final section of chapter four is arguably at the more provocative core of this project. Further, this section explicitly and purposefully addresses the roles, impacts, attitudes, and behaviors of White teachers in K-12 school-based racial equity work, something mostly missing from the literature (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). However, before getting into the experiences and powerful ideas of the seven participants, I would like to clarify.

Another Acknowledgment of Intentionality and Complexity

As we enter the final section of this chapter, I both recognize and acknowledge the naivety of asking the seven participants about White K-12 educators in general, as if the close to 3 million of us all the same because we are White. I remember when Ms. Alexander shared early on in our connections, “Number one: Black people are not monolithic. We don't do all the same things. We don't.” I agree wholeheartedly in regard to White people as well. We don’t do all the same things. We don’t. Honestly, I have experienced countless times when I have disagreed with White colleagues, even “friends” on issues related to race and racism, and have not sought to repair the ensuing relational fractures due to what perhaps felt like irreconcilable differences in thought and being. However, older, wiser, me realizes more and more, that it wasn’t necessarily the people that got to me; it was the more personal, defensive, and oftentimes angry reaction to my clumsy attempts to invite them to see and challenge the operation of whiteness, and to embrace a more humble, critical mind. And yes, I get it, naming whiteness comes with
the risk of sounding perhaps too academic or too intellectual, and accusing someone of wielding whiteness without wincing can have incredibly mixed results.

Drawing from Dyson’s (2018) brilliant take on whiteness in general: no, whiteness may not be “real” or “true” in a sense that it is not “biologically heritable” or “in genes or chromosomes,” but it is real “in the sense that societies and rights and goods and resources and privileges have been built on its foundation” (p. x). The same could be said about K-12 education, and that whiteness has played a role in everything from curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school funding (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and that whiteness has played a significant role with staffing, too. That said, in this section, I’m more suspicious about the operation of whiteness, and less so the actions of individual White people. I’m more so interested in the deeply marred and scarred systemic roots (read: history) and branches (read: contemporary manifestations) of racism and whiteness, not the individual bad apples (read: “racists”). Simply put, I’m suspiciously centering the disease, not the carrier(s).

Additionally, just as critical race theory emphasizes a systemic exploration and critique of the operation and impact(s) of racism throughout many aspects of life in the U.S. including education, health, and wealth; I too would like to explore and critique the systemic operation and impact(s) of whiteness and racial inequity in education, more so than critiquing and generalizing about White people. Furthermore, when I reference my goal of taking aim at whiteness, I am not simply referring to an individual’s racial identity, but more so referring to a state of being that is rooted in the “supposedly ‘commonsense’ beliefs that privilege White experiences, assumptions and interests”
(Gillborn, 2008, p. 244). Put differently, whiteness can be conceptualized as a social power that normalizes and centers White peoples’ position, perspective, subjectivity, emotionality and affectivity (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). I agree that whiteness is an operating frame and not a physical manifestation (M. Lynn, personal communication, January 3, 2020), and so in order to disrupt the ongoing and harmful operation of whiteness, one must be aware of its power and presence, as well as the ways in which majoritarian White people (including myself) are either casually complicit with/in it (whiteness), or actively betraying it in our work and being. Personally, as a White person constantly learning about and aiming to betray my own complicity with whiteness, I have learned that it requires stamina, deep humility, constant learning and mistakes, comradeship and community with race-radical people of Color, and a perpetually provoked mind and consciousness. However, all the aforementioned things (humility, learning, etc.) are not only good for me, as I attempt to “see my whiteness for what it is” and “try to make things better now,” but more importantly such efforts are fair and just for those who never had the “privileges nor protections” (p. xii) that whiteness affords (Dyson, 2018). While this will be discussed more in the next chapter, I hope this section serves as a call in, not call out, to White people and educators that are ready and interested in the work of (re)constructing a more racially equitable system of education.

That said, this section intently and purposefully explores the varying roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, with an intentional, critical suspicion towards the operation of whiteness. In this section, I aim to illuminate how the actions and/or inactions of White educators in
racial equity work affected both the project participants and their school or district’s racial equity efforts more broadly. While many of the earlier interview questions were not explicitly race-conscious in the sense that they didn’t name White people or people of Color, the questions in this final part of the interview specifically named the (White) elephant in the (class)room, mainly referencing the overwhelmingly White teacher force in the Pacific Northwest. It should be restated that 89.1% of K-12 public school teachers in Oregon are White, while just 61.9% of students are White (Oregon Department of Education, 2020). In Washington, 86.8% of teachers are White while 50% of students are White (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020). Throughout this project, I have learned from the project participants that racial equity work in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest - regardless of its intentions - can make them hypervisible and their needs invisible, and it can cause harm, burnout, and pain. This section illuminates similar racial realities through the shared experiences and voices of the seven project participants; who I wish to thank deeply for their honesty and trust.

**The Varying Roles and Impacts of White Educators**

In this section, I address the ways in which the participants perceived and described the roles and impacts of White educators in their school-based experiences with racial equity work. Additionally, I asked the participants to describe the “perhaps varying” roles of the teachers who are White. I hoped that by including the words “perhaps varying,” I made clear that I was not implying that all White people are the same or act the same. Table 9 includes a summary of highlighted responses from all seven participants.
Table 9

Roles and Impacts of White Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>There are several different roles including White knights and saviors, rule-followers and chameleons, resistors, and allies and accomplices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>There is a lack of validation and understanding of teachers of Color from White colleagues, which can lead to anger, resentment, and distrust from Black colleagues and communities, especially in places that have been gentrified.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>There are a lot of White educators who care and think that they're right when it comes to issues like racial equity, and that can be counterproductive to being flexible in your mind and open to changing yourself. Also, sometimes White women use emotions to manipulate and detract the work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Alexander</td>
<td>White people’s fear of Black people leads to paralysis in racial equity work. Racial equity is not about White self-image, it's about communities and students of Color. White educators need both confidence and humility, and to commit to change, even if it’s hard and they sometimes “step in it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Anti-racism work is catered to and delivered by White people, and the growth of administrators and teachers of Color is therefore “stunted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Free</td>
<td>It’s helpful when White people are aware of racial privilege, and when they intentionally elevate the voices of folks of Color. It’s also problematic when the people of Color with the lived experience are not the ones leading the work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Douglass</td>
<td>Personally and pedagogically, White educators should be driven by empathy and seek deeper understanding of others. If people do not acknowledge racial privilege, how can they ever really understand what a student of Color goes through?</td>
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Note. At your school site/district, how would you describe the perhaps varying role(s) and impact(s) of educators who are White in regard to the school’s racial equity work?

When reflecting on the perhaps varying roles of majoritarian White educators in school-based racial equity work Mr. Brill shared, “So I think complacency is a huge thing.” The Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) defines complacency as “a feeling of smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements.” Mr. Brill elaborated by explaining that he perceived racial equity work was generally being viewed as something to do, a check-list item, which would certainly fit the notion of approaching and engaging
in the work with “uncritical satisfaction.” Mr. Brill later explained what he meant by complacency:

Viewing antiracism, social justice, racial justice, whatever term we want to use as a one-stop shop. ‘I read this book, so now I'm an antiracist, right? I have this Instagram bio, so I'm good right? It’s February, I taught my kids about Black people, now it's time for everyone else to step up.’

I found it especially interesting to consider the role and intersections of White educators’ engagement in racial equity work and their own ego, and the implications of complacency with both the dominant culture and role of whiteness, which was a thread that would come up for several participants and one that I will explore in more depth in the next chapter.

Mr. Brill went on to describe what he perceived as four separate groups, or roles of White educators in school-based racial equity work. Please see Table 10, which includes how Mr. Brill personally described these groups and the actions and inactions that helped define them. Direct quotes are primarily used in bullet points to assist with readability.

**Table 10**

*Mr. Brill’s Four Roles of White Educators*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups/roles of White educators</th>
<th>Description of groups/roles (quotes from Mr. Brill)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“White knights or White saviors”</td>
<td>“They have good intentions and are genuinely trying to grow as people, but end up centering themselves in the conversation or the work that is being done.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“They think ‘I'm this [label, e.g. anti-racist, ally, etc.], or I’m accomplished.’ When you self-identify like that, you're moving away from the issues and saying, hey look at me, it's all about me.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It's a difficult group to challenge because you understand that they are good intending people, and you don't want to alienate and discourage them from doing the work, but the message has now shifted [to be about them].”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“For me, [this is] the hardest group to have really critical conversations with”</td>
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because they're not in a headspace to understand that they still need to
grow. They feel like they're at the mountaintop, and they don't need to go
any further, they've climbed as high as they can climb.”

| “Moderate, middle, rule-followers” | “They do what they're told either way, whether the district is saying yes, we need to do more racial equity work - OK, we’ll do that. Or, saying no, we're taking a strong stance against Black Lives Matter - OK, that's what we're doing.”

“It's these people who are chameleons; they can go either way, depending on the turn of the tide.” |

| “Resistors” | “These people who are just outright not willing to do this work for whatever political, social agenda that they have.” |

| “Allies and Accomplices” | “They're doing the work, but they're not talking about it.”

“It's an interesting kind of phenomenon where they’re probably our strongest accomplices and allies, but we [educators of Color] may not have a relationship with them because they're so dedicated to the work that's being done and they don't want any attention brought on themselves.” |

As Mr. Brill elaborated on these four groups, I couldn’t help but think about some of the concepts and White racial identities that are explored within and across critical whiteness studies such as white saviorism, racial innocence, fragility, silence, ego and self-image, and many more. There are lots of important implications for White educators here, including myself, which I will discuss more in depth in the next chapter.

Ms. Reed and Ms. Alexander also both commented on the presence and influence of White educators’ ego and identity in racial equity work, as well as a lack of broader perspective that could be a result of complacency with whiteness. For example, Ms. Reed reflected:

I think in the Pacific Northwest you just have a lot of [White] people who care, and think that they're right, and those two are counterproductive to being flexible in your mind to change yourself. If you're also culturally blind 'cause you're surrounded by people who are similar to you, it feeds into the fact that you care and that you're right. You think that you know it all, right?
What Ms. Reed was describing fit well within Mr. Brill’s notion of the “White knight/savior” as someone who may have good intentions but also feels like “they don't need to go any further, they've climbed as high as they can climb.” Further, when Ms. Reed problematized being surrounded by similar people and the presence of “cultural blindness,” I couldn’t help but think of the predominantly White population in the Pacific Northwest, and also the conceptualization that whiteness is the normalization and centering of White peoples’ position, perspective, subjectivity, emotionality and affectivity (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Similarly, Gonsalves (2008) described what he conceptualized as “hysterical blindness and the ideology of denial.” Further, Gonsalves (2008) argued that resistance to things like multicultural education - or in the realm of this project resistance to racial equity work - resistance can be “a psychological defense of the individual ego and the ideological values of the dominant culture” (Gonsalves, p. 4). I felt I understood what Ms. Reed meant when she cautioned the intersecting dangers of thinking you care, thinking you’re right, and being surrounded by similar people and mindsets. Additionally, this also reminded me of when Ms. Reed said that we need more marigolds to keep the garden diverse, healthy, pest-free and thriving; and to challenge ourselves from consistently confirming our bias by seeking those similar to us and our ways of thinking.

Additionally, Ms. Alexander shared that she believed White educators in racial equity work benefit from a blend and boost of both confidence and humility. She explained:

The next step [for White educators in racial equity work] needs to be building confidence and humility at the same time. White educators need confidence in
knowing that OK, I'm gonna step in it [mess up], and listen. I'm gonna mess up. I sure am, but I'm gonna learn from it. I'm doing something different tomorrow or the next time.

Ms. Alexander then more specifically spoke on the need for humility from White educators in racial equity work. She shared:

And also humility as in I am a slice, a tiny slice of the world… I'm not the world, and so the way that I do things doesn't have to be, you know, the standard. Why am I counting my way of life and way of being as standard? It is not. And when people realize how small of a fish they are in a humongous unimaginably big pond, but then I feel like there will be some more connection.

Whiteness was previously described as the “supposedly ‘commonsense’ beliefs that privilege White experiences, assumptions and interests” (Gillborn, 2008, p. 244), and Ms. Alexander saw right through it as she called for both confidence and humility towards the betrayal of whiteness.

**White Fear and Emotions, and Black Realities and Complexities**

As Ms. Alexander elaborated on what she meant when she mentioned the need for White educators to develop more confidence and humility, she paused and looked squarely at me and asked: “You said you want me to keep it real?” To which I nodded yes, and knew we were going where we needed to go. This confirmation to “keep it real” made me again think of Kinloch and San Pedro’s (2014) “the space between” (p. 30) the dialogic spiral of speaking and listening, and the creation of reciprocal trust through conversation and relationship building. Or, put differently, keeping it real.

Ms. Alexander then matter-of-factly shared, “I think White educators are scared of Black people.” She paused for about five seconds, looked away in thought, and then looked back and me and continued:
And that fear drives a lot of decisions and a lot of indecisions. It’s insane, the amount of tiptoeing that happens [by White educators around Black people], and I mean, I feel like it's human for people to want to do something and not mess up. I feel like it's real empathy to not want to cause further harm. But I feel like White folks are so afraid of stepping in shit, that they don't even bother to walk through the grass. That fear is paralyzing.

The role of White fear of Black people is something that I had not deeply considered, as I previously highlighted more egoic and intellectual fears White people may have as a result of whiteness (Gonsalves, 2008), though Ms. Alexander’s statement made me think hard and to consider the role of White fear more broadly. For example, Donnor (2021) described the notion of White peoples’ fear in relation to losing the property value of their whiteness (citing Harris, 1993), meaning that the more Black people prove themselves as “intellectually equal,” the more “the reputational/ property value in their [White peoples’] whiteness” is diminished (p. 261).

To illuminate what she meant regarding White confidence and fear, Ms. Alexander went on to reenact a situation by recreating a dialogue with a White peer as if it were happening in real time. The scenario felt very authentic and genuine, and also very personal in the way in which Ms. Alexander recalled and recited it. She first set the context in describing a situation where a White teacher chose not to work with a reading group composed of Black male students. Ms. Alexander replayed it out for me:

Person 1: “You know you need to pull these boys for this reading group; why don't you?”
White educator: “Oh, because I don't want it to look like I'm just pulling in the Black boys.”
Person 1: “OK, is that affecting them? Or is that affecting you and more about you and how you feel? Or is it more about what they need?”
Ms. Alexander then described another scenario when White educators have come to talk with her at school.

People come to my door and I'm working, and I look up, they’re like “Oh, are you OK?” “Yeah, I'm OK” [Ms. Alexander then scrunched her eyes and tilted her head in a confused way]. “Is this a good time?” “Yeah.” “OK, sorry to interrupt you.” All this apologetic tiptoeing, and I am not an intimidating person. All I do is laugh. I laugh, I talk trash, I talk loud, and I do a lot of stuff, but I'm very supportive. And I feel like the same tiptoeing that happens around me happens around other Black educators. And it also happens with Black families. It’s insane how avoidant people are in making phone calls. So, I feel like it’s fear. I guess part of it is a want to do the right thing, with the other part being self-image, fear of doing the wrong thing. And that fear paralyzes them from doing anything.

This was the second time Ms. Alexander used the word “insane” to describe what she perceived as fear in White educators to interact with, let alone connect, teach, and learn with Black students, colleagues, and community members. And Ms. Alexander stated it clearly, the fear in White people could be self-image - perhaps damage towards their reputation or even the way they see themselves - or the fear could be of doing the wrong thing. Ms. Alexander later added, “That's why Singleton called it courageous conversations ’cause it takes courage [to talk and learn about race and equity]. Step up and do this work.”

Additionally, Ms. Reed spoke about the role of emotions being central in White educators’ roles and actions in racial equity work. Ms. Reed was always clear and deliberate in her thoughts and ideas, and this instance was no different, though it did come with a disclaimer. “I'm gonna say this, and I don't know if it'll come out as respectful as I mean,” she began. Similar to Ms. Alexander confirming that she was going to “keep it real,” I knew that Ms. Reed’s disclaimer would open the door for us to get to
where we needed to go. Ms. Reed went on to describe the role of White women’s emotions in work around race:

When White female educators start crying and talking about their hardship [during work around race and racism] or staying in an emotional place, you're just being manipulative. You're manipulating the situation.

The role of White women’s’ emotions in work and learning on race and racism is something intentionally explored by race scholars including Diangelo (2018) who wrote about “White women’s tears” (p. 131), and Warren and Talley’s (2017) *Nice White ladies: Race, whiteness, and the preparation of White female teachers to be culturally responsive educators*. To build on the role of emotions, the conceptualization of white emotionality is helpful to consider. More specifically, Matias and Allen (2013) argued that white emotionality is when White people keep the emphasis on themselves which “minimizes love and takes for granted its fundamental role in the formation of social group attachments and senses of self and other” (p. 287). The normalization of white emotionality is the operation of whiteness.

Further, Ms. Reed seemed to be describing a White female characterization similar to what Brice and Brooms (2020) detailed in the text *Surviving Becky(s): Pedagogies for deconstructing whiteness and gender* as “Waterworks Landmine Becky” (p. 19). More specifically, “WLB” as she is referred to, is a White woman who uses crying as “her weapon of choice,” and frequently interjects in meetings or situations regarding race and racism and often tears up and “goes off on a diatribe about how no one realized her hardships” (i.e. economic or familial) while refusing to acknowledge or
consider “the benefits of whiteness” or the experiences of people of Color in attendance (p. 19).

After Ms. Reed shared about how she perceived White female educators to sometimes manipulate situations with their emotions, she then provided an example of the opposite by referencing an educational group called Decoding Dyslexia, which is a group of multi-racial mothers who had children with dyslexia who Ms. Reed perceived as having a fiercer commitment and approach to challenging work and leadership. Ms. Reed described these mothers as an inspiration and model of moving beyond emotions and into thinking, planning, and more importantly, action. Ms. Reed shared:

Once they [Decoding Dyslexia mothers] got over the emotional, them some badass bitches let me tell you why. Because they started thinking and planning. And we are educators [emphasis added], and that's what the hell we need to do… And so, when you cry at a meeting and you stay in an emotional place, you are not being like those Decoding Dyslexia moms who said, this is a problem, and I know how to change it 'cause I'm powerful, and I'm educated, and I know how to think, and I know how to plan, and I know how to codeswitch, and I know how to talk this talk, and I know how to persistently push and push and push. We need to have that same attitude for every [emphasis added] child... So there you go, I cursed on the record.

Each time Ms. Reed said “push” she hit a closed fist into her open hand; I could hear and feel her passion. I could always count on Ms. Reed to honestly share what was on her mind, and to both model and describe the power and immense responsibility of being an educator who works with and in the service of young people.

Later on, Ms. Reed illuminated another challenge of racial equity work in predominantly White spaces when she shared the personal and professional risks of being Black and speaking honestly and personally about issues of race and schooling. Ms. Reed explained:
Equity work has to really get deep, and it has to get deep without it being my personal or professional assassination. If I speak up, right, I'm really, really careful. You gotta think, before I talk at my school, before a person of Color speaks up to talk about practice; I heard this gentleman one time say it's like mental judo. You have to think and rethink and think again and rethink, and if it offends someone, so then you're always like looking 10 steps down the road. You know, whereas I don't think [White] people do that before they speak. I think [White] people would prefer to just not even enter the conversation because they don't want to risk getting called racist, and if that's where you're entering, we just will never get better, right?

Ms. Reed would share more later on about how any “work” regarding race and racism was very personal for her, and risky, which illuminates another challenge regarding how White people who do not experience racism personally can most respectfully and responsibly enter the conversation and work from a more academic and intellectual place, as opposed to a personal place.

Ms. Molkera also shared some of the interpersonal tensions and challenges of racial equity work in predominantly White settings. For example, Ms. Molkera detailed what she experienced as a lack of validation from White colleagues as to the complexities and challenges of her daily experiences in being “the only one” (person of Color), and how that impacted both her work and personal sense of being. Ms. Molkera reflected:

The damage is in the gaslighting of teachers of Color that their presence is invalidated, you don't feel like you're worthy, you know. My son and I made sure to say no, you're worth it... [Some colleagues made me feel] worthless and powerless, unwanted. And I knew it wasn't 'cause of my kids [students]. But imagine being that person, the only one [person of Color] in the building, and no one is there to support you.

Ms. Molkera then shared a bit about how her son began to notice and perceive her mistreatment from her White colleagues at work and how that affected Ms. Molkera’s job security and personal well-being. She shared that the racism she was experiencing at
work made her son angry, and that he wasn’t the only one who was upset to learn about her experiences in predominantly White schools and districts as a Black woman. Ms. Molkera shared, “Strangers hear my story and they get so angry, incensed, so there is a ripple effect of not taking care of people of Color, and how dangerous it is for us not to.”

Mr. James and Ms. Free both shared a similar sentiment regarding the reality and complexity of racial equity work in a predominantly White system. They both pointed to the challenges of predominantly White-facilitated staff development that often centered around self-learning or concepts like white privilege, which clearly cater to a predominantly White audience. Additionally, Mr. James and Ms. Free both noted the lack of opportunities for “homegrown,” local leadership and opportunities for the growth and development of educators and leaders of Color. For example, Mr. James shared:

I have to sit through [meetings and trainings] and they [predominantly White-facilitators] don't differentiate them [trainings]. So, if the training is mostly about self-learning, and it's mostly framed by White well-intended leaders, the impact is that very few Black, Brown and minority leaders and teachers are really getting professional development. So, our growth is kind of stunted. All the anti-racist work is really catered towards White leaders, but we sit through it… The curation of our professional work and learning is coming from a White lens for a white lens. And that trickles down to our students.

There were many moments in the interviews when I would notice both similarities and differences in what the participants were sharing. In this instance, I immediately thought of what Mr. Brill had shared earlier when he said “as a Black man I am hypervisible, but my needs are invisible.” I shared Mr. Brill’s statement with Mr. James and Mr. James immediately replied with, “Oh! Oh! Zing! Zing!” Mr. Brill’s words obviously resonated with Mr. James. “That was a great, great point he made,” Mr. James replied. The notion of critically considering the role of whiteness, and who racial equity work is for, and who
it is created by and for, and to whose benefit and burden, are very important considerations in this work.

Mr. James also felt that it was a common practice to go out of state to bring in presenters and leaders of Color to lead and present on issues related to racial equity in the Pacific Northwest. Mr. James challenged that notion when he explained:

We also do this thing where we feel like we need to go outside of 40 miles and learn from people of Color that are not from the state, and I think we're really dismissive of all the experiences and historical perspective and regional perspective that our local admin[istrators] of Color have.

Ms. Free was on the same page as Mr. James with regard to the need for more racial equity work led by educators of Color, and also noted that the “labor” of educators of Color in racial equity work is different and should be accounted for. Ms. Free explained:

It’s problematic when the folks of Color with the lived experience are not the ones leading the work, right?... I think because of that just proportionality of White educators and educators of Color, the whiteness is being centered in the equity work. And you have to acknowledge the labor of Black and Brown educators. And, I see it is different than the labor of other [White] educators.

Mr. Brill also had some similar thoughts on the different workloads and burdens that educators of Color and White educators experience with/in racial equity work, and in regard to racism more broadly. Mr. Brill shared:

You know you [White educators] can turn the TV off and you can walk outside and forget that racism exists. I don't have that privilege. This is something that I live with and deal with on an everyday basis. So, like my sense of urgency is of course going to be different than the rest of my White colleagues and administrators, right? Because there's just not that priority. Whether or not they are accomplices or allies, like that doesn’t matter. The bottom line is I can't ever get away from this [racism]. This is in every aspect of my life and it's the same for our students [of Color].
Mr. Brill said it as clear as can be, that race and racism impact his everyday life, they are not just work.

Ms. Free also pointed to another example of inequity in racial equity work in predominantly White spaces when she detailed how even in instances where there are strong leaders of Color pushing racial equity work, such instances can come with unfortunate consequences and the risk of retaliation. Ms. Free shared:

At the building level, you can have these strong voices [of Color], but then once it becomes something that has potential to actually be disruptive, then people are moved [to another job or location]. I mean, I've seen administrators moved in retaliation for supporting things that were progressive, inclusive, and that garnered media attention.

This is a good example of an inherent nuance, complexity, and inequity in this work: while participants shared the desire for more leaders of Color leading racial equity work, it was also acknowledged that such leaders of Color face the possibility of retaliation. Ms. Free shared that this was especially the case in the wake of Donald Trump’s presidency beginning in 2016, and the empowered racial justice movement for Black lives in the spring and summer of 2020.

Mr. James, Ms. Free, and Mr. Douglass also shared positive aspects of White educators’ involvement as part of their answers describing the varying role(s) and impact(s) of White educators in school-based racial equity work. More specifically, Mr. James stated, “I lead with the criticism, but I think the overall impact [of White educators in racial equity work] is still positive.” Mr. James went on:

I think that White staff are questioning, or are like really being reflective on their
experience, their privilege, their interactions, and their impact, and I think that's huge. There's a benefit. You collectively are better and healthier as a person, right? So, I think our system is healthier with the focus on this work.

Additionally, Ms. Free also shared, “To be fair and give credit where credit's due, there have been some phenomenal White allies and co-conspirators in my experiences.” Ms. Free clarified that these individuals were more school-based colleagues and less district leadership. “What made them phenomenal co-conspirators?” I asked. “The way that they showed up,” Ms. Free replied. “Like naming and being super aware of their privilege. Intentionally elevating the voices of folks of Color when those folks had been hobbled. Stepping up, you know, and speaking up. And pushing back.”

Similarly to Ms. Free and Mr. James, Mr. Douglass shared what he saw as the importance and positive impact that arises when White teachers confront the reality of having very different racialized experiences to those of their colleagues, students, and communities of Color, and how confronting that reality helped White educators more deeply engage in learning and ensuing action. Further, Mr. Douglass shared that if White educators chose not to acknowledge racial privilege, he wondered how they could ever really understand what a student of Color goes through.

Finally, Ms. Free also shared a personal example of an interpersonal conflict and disagreement she had with a White colleague on an issue of race and racism. Ms. Free shared that another of her White colleagues physically accompanied her for her follow-up conversation with the staff member, and was there for her emotionally, which made her feel less isolated. “So, you know, there are some folks,” she shared.

Furthering the Work, Holding it Back, or Maintaining the Status Quo?
In this section, I address the ways in which the participants perceived and described the way White educators impacted the pace and productivity of school-based racial equity work.

The next question in our interviews read: “In your experience, to what extent did/do educators who are White further the school’s racial equity work, hold it back, or maintain the status quo?” The follow up question was, “Can you share any examples?” with clarification: “You can speak to this in general, and/or by mentioning specific actions/occurrences without any personal identifying information, please.” I attempted to frame this question by first acknowledging that generalizing any racial group is, of course, problematic. However, I also invited the participants to lean into the complexity and racial reality - that educators throughout the Pacific Northwest are overwhelmingly and disproportionately White as compared to the student populations and communities that they serve - and to share examples based on their experiences, and that’s what they did. In this section I will highlight ideas shared primarily by Mr. James, Ms. Reed, and Ms. Molkera. Please see Table 11 for a summary of the participants’ answers.

**Table 11**

*Progress, Regress, and Stagnation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Racial equity and justice work is being co-opted by White people, especially centering White peoples’ identity and emotions; there are differing views on what is white supremacy and how educators frame and approach the work of dismantling it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>White educators’ self-awareness work is not productive; actions matter more than words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>Language can halt and discourage people from participating and buying into racial equity work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* In your experience, to what extent did/do educators who are White further the school’s racial equity work, hold it back, or maintain the status quo?
Mr. James shared several examples of ways he perceived that educators who are White impacted the scope and pace of racial equity work. For example, Mr. James explained that in 2020-2021, he perceived that there was a shift in both racial equity work and in the racial justice movement that began to center the needs of people who are White. He began by asking me personally, “I really want your thoughts on this,” and he subsequently used the word “weird” three times in his answer to the question, which showed me both the formative and complex thoughts he was having, and also the importance and value of interracial conversation and collaboration if we stand a chance at disrupting and dismantling white supremacy in the U.S. Further, Mr. James shared:

I really want your opinion on this, at least like the thought. I think our equity movement is being appropriated by White people. You know, and that's scary sometimes because it's almost like the community of Color has to assimilate to equity work. It's so ironic, right? There is this weird line of division and there was this weird turning point where it [equity movement] turned into like a commodity and a fad. Black Lives Matter stopped being about people like me knowing that we gotta put both hands out the door when the cops pull us over.

Mr. James then mentioned the role of emotions and identity as playing significant roles in the shift, though not the emotions and identities of Black people, but of White people. Mr. James went on:

At some point, it almost seemed like the emotions of the movement, and the identity of the White person holding these signs up, saying this is who we are, started to overshadow the actual spirit of the movement [for Black lives and justice].

It was clear that Mr. James was reflecting deeply on this shift and what it meant. He continued:

I can't put my finger on it. Maybe you could help me understand it all. It was like a movement that had gone beyond like Black people. It became this like social movement that I, I think just was really unclear for some people, for me it is still
unclear. We live in a really complicated society and a lot of people want to do well, and we take up these causes and I don't think we are always really clear on what we mean by the cause or where we're going. Except for we want to be involved and do well, you know? And sometimes we get it right and sometimes we miss the mark.

Mr. James’ statement on people wanting to be involved and doing well made me think of how Ms. Reed previously cautioned the intersecting dangers of thinking you care, thinking you’re right, and being surrounded by similar people and mindsets, and how that can stifle more critical growth and open-mindedness.

Additionally, it was the important, complex moments like this with Mr. James when we went a bit off the academic interview script of me asking a question and a project participant answering and then moving on to another question, that were some of the most memorable and impactful for me. Mr. James was sharing such rich ideas that awakened new thoughts and provocations in my mind, while simultaneously our relationship and connection continued to grow and deepen. This moment again, similar to multiple other moments throughout this entire project, illuminated Kinloch and San Pedro’s (2014) notion of “the space between” (p. 30); the space that prized “the co-construction of knowledge, human agency and voice, diverse perspectives, moments of vulnerability, and acts of listening” (p. 23). This exchange with Mr. James was meaningful not only because of its complexity, but because of the opportunity that it provided to collaboratively unpack and ponder some of the nuance with/in this work, while also taking the time and space to process what was happening around us in real time with both a race-conscious, humanizing approach and action-oriented frame.
Ultimately, it seemed that Mr. James perceived that both the racial justice movement and school-based racial equity work were starting to be more about White people, and their identities and emotions, than about Black lives, justice, and racial equity. I agreed with Mr. James when I considered the sheer amount of times I’ve witnessed White educators talking about and processing their racial privilege, including some disputing it, as well the time spent on intellectualizing concepts like fragility or the elements of white supremacy culture with very little attention to - let alone action - as to how all these things impact individuals and communities of Color, especially at one’s school or in their classroom. Mr. James then went on to share a specific example of the racial justice movement being co-opted by the emergence of causes like Blue Lives Matter, which redirected energy and intentionality away from both race and Black lives and justice. It is worth noting that similar to the workforce of K-12 educators in the U.S., many major police forces across the country, especially in urban settings, are also much Whiter in their staff makeup than the communities they serve (Keating and Uhrmacher, 2020).

Mr. James’ ideas on the sometimes central role of White identity and the co-opting of racial equity and justice work also connected to something Ms. Reed had shared around White “self-awareness” work as well. More specifically, right after Ms. Reed shared about how she was frustrated at the role of White emotions in racial equity work and how complex and challenging it was to be one of the only staff members of Color, she shared a very memorable and powerful take on “self-awareness” and what she believed racial equity work really needed:
I don't need to tell [White] people that they’re fragile or that they have privilege. I want to say so what, now what? Let's do this different. I'm not an Alcoholics Anonymous. I don't need you to admit it. Self-awareness is wonderful, it is necessary. But it's necessary from this one way, if we know good practices [emphasis added]. [White people need to know] You are part of something that's bigger than you and you're a very important part. We need you in order to be we [referring to a collaborative community], and that’s even what I tell my kids.

Admittedly, Ms. Reed’s comment about Alcoholics Anonymous made me both chuckle and cringe as I reflected on if, or more realistically when and how many times, I had involuntarily subjected my colleagues of Color to my white racialized “confessions.” However, and more seriously, Ms. Reed’s notion of the “we” made me think of both collaborative criticality and comradeship, both of which I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter. I also thought back to how Ms. Alexander referenced the need for humility from White educators, and the realization that they are just “a tiny slice of the world.” Further, Ms. Reed went on:

But I think for [White] teachers, I don't need them to admit it [racial privilege or fragility]. I already know what I know. I know what I know [emphasis added]. I already know that most of the teachers I work with aren't training their sons like I trained mine, 10 and 2 o'clock [referring to where to place your hands on the steering wheel if pulled over by the police]. And I trained them in a mean way. If my students saw me, they'd be like ‘Ms. Reed is strict,’ 'cause I'm teaching him to survive so it's personal for me. You can't know me and not know how much I love my children. So it's personal.

Ms. Reed clearly felt that it was not her job, nor was it productive to dwell on White educators’ journey of understanding racial privilege or fragility, but instead that “good practices” could be a response to the timeless and golden question: so what, now what? Ms. Reed then went on to detail the hollowness of words as compared to actions, especially regarding racial equity and White educators in an emotional state. Ms. Reed explained:
They [White teachers] get all breathy and stuff… You know I was raised by a woman born in 1902, flattery is from the teeth, appreciation is from the heart. I don't care about what somebody who doesn't have to train their child about 10:00 and 2:00 o'clock when they're driving, I don't care what you say, I don't care. I don't care about all these things that you say 'cause I see what you do. I’m not moved by words.

This made me think hard about the difference between confessions and actions, between risk and reticence, as they relate to efforts towards more racial equity. I also thought about the sometimes vast distinction between intention and impact, and says whom and for whom. Just as Mr. James had previously shared his concern that both racial equity work and the racial justice movement were being co-opted to be more about the emotions and the identity of the White person holding up the signs or proclaiming who they are, Ms. Reed wasn’t here for it.

Finally, regarding the role of emotions and words in the realm of racial equity and justice work, Mr. James also described an interesting phenomenon that happened during the racial justice movement for Black lives and justice in 2020-2021. Mr. James laughed a bit when he recalled the memory:

And I'll never forget, one day people just started sending me like the emoji with prayer hands [🙏] and being like ‘I'm thinking about you.’ And it's like, oh, that's nice, you’re thinking about me [laughs]. I get this long-winded thing about like, how they don't understand how difficult, like they couldn't imagine how difficult it is to be me.

It’s important to remember that Mr. James had previously shared, “When we see the [racialized] disparities we equate that with victimization. And then we have staff engaging with every single person of Color as if they are a victim. And you can sense that. I don't feel victimized.” It seemed as if Mr. James saw victimization and pity from some White colleagues and peers as patronizing, perhaps even disempowering. When Mr.
James shared the above story, it felt similar to what Ms. Reed had shared around not being moved by emotions and words. Moreover, Mr. James was not moved by emojis and prayers at this time of racial, historical, and educational reckoning. Instead of a prayer, maybe Mr. James saw more value in the pray-er (the individual who was praying), and the individual who is also capable of acting and doing; disrupting and dismantling. Mr. James went on to describe how he felt Black people perceived and played their role within and across racial justice movements and efforts differently than White people. He explained:

We [referring to Black people] frame up racial movements different. And we go about the way to bring racial change differently. It doesn't mean I care less about, you know the future and livelihood of my community. It just means I choose to go about it differently. And I think a whole lot of Black people got made to feel uncomfortable by well-intentioned White people reaching out trying to actually give real support.

This got me wondering about two things, first the “framing up” of racial equity work, and from whose perspective and to whose benefit and burden, and also how can we create the space and conditions for these honest, interracial conversations and action-oriented coalitions? Are “courageous conversations” enough? Or would that just turn into (White) educators’ confessions à la Alcoholics Anonymous, or more perceived victimization and prayers?

Before moving on, I’d like to more deeply explore Mr. James' notion of “framing up” racial equity work and the implications of race. Further, Mr. James gave some examples of things that he perceived to be more pressing priorities for White people, but less so priorities for him and for what he believed was at the heart of racial equity work. Mr. James shared two examples, one being a “hyper focus” on language, and another
being White peoples’ conceptualizations of white supremacy and how to dismantle it. Mr. James then detailed two specific examples of predominantly White educators engaging in racial equity work, but perhaps not in a way that he believed was thoughtful nor very productive.

First, Mr. James described what he perceived as “the hyper focus on language regulation,” and he shared the example of predominantly White institutions struggling on whether to call Black students “Black” or “African-American,” and whether to formally refer to Latino/a/x and Chicano/a/x populations as “Latinx.” Mr. James explained that he was curious about the effectiveness of a “hyper focus” on language in racial equity efforts. He elaborated:

[The term Latinx] I think it’s well intended, also like with gender inclusion, and using progressive terms, but it’s [language regulation] not actually changing the way that we treat them [students of Color or students facing other marginalization] in terms of welcoming them, intentional inclusion, in terms of policy, in terms of our day-to-day practice, and I think that that makes the language meaningless.

Mr. James’s comments seemed to have both a critical and intellectual curiosity, and I imagine would surely benefit from the perspectives of members of the Latino/a/x communities and/or individuals that are personally impacted by binary gender exclusivity. In the realm of racial equity, perhaps a spirited debate on racialized language would be productive and necessary if students, staff, or community members of Color felt they weren’t being validated and affirmed. However, I could also see the potential of such conversations/debates, especially if being led and facilitated by predominantly White educators in predominantly White spaces, as falling more into the intellectual realm and less so the practical and actional, and therefore perhaps having little to no
impact on students or staff of Color, which seemed to be what Mr. James was voicing concern about. This made me think back to how adamantly Mr. James had urged for more specific and intentional efforts at gathering student and community “panoramic data” to more accurately understand their unique perspectives and experiences.

Ms. Molkera also spoke about the role of language, and how she believed language can halt and discourage people from participating and buying into racial equity work. Ms. Molkera explained:

The language is blocking us when we're saying things that are generalized. When we are saying all cops are bad, when we can't allow someone to say all lives matter, there's a danger in moving forward. Where we are isolating and we're placing people in their place to be defensive, you can't teach people and you can't work with people who are feeling defensive, right? We use these cliche phrases that unfortunately polarize and are now slowing our ability to move forward. I'm not, I don't like jargon.

When I asked Ms. Molkera to share some examples of language that she felt harmed racial equity progress and led to polarization and disengagement, she shared the terms “white fragility,” “white allies,” and “white supremacy.” It seemed that Ms. Molkera was mostly referring to terms about White people that disengaged White people. Further, instead of using terms like “white fragility,” “white allies,” and “white supremacy,” Ms. Molkera suggested:

Let's tell stories that matter and show the heart of the work, and let's bring to the forefront those that are doing the work and let them speak and let them have a say in the change. And let's create a system that will continue to put these pieces in place.

To me, Ms. Molkera seemed to be describing the primacy and prioritization of counter-stories, one of the tenets of critical race theory, as opposed to focusing on terms and concepts more frequently reserved for describing intellectual identities and/or historical
concepts, constructs, and/or systems that center White people, including the term whiteness. Moreover, I perceived that Ms. Molkera was critiquing the intellectualization of terms that academics and scholars have used to try to interrogate white racial identity (such as white fragility), which are common in frameworks like critical whiteness studies. To Ms. Molkera, such terms and concepts were “jargon” that could be both polarizing and “slowing our ability to move forward” towards more racial equity. These were all rich, layered, and nuanced ideas that I was taking in with an open and racing mind.

Mr. James also highlighted another example of what he perceived as misguided priorities from educators who are White that he did not believe centered students of Color and their experiences. Mr. James explained:

The notion of white supremacy is an interesting one. And I think actually it's really interesting because I see that dialogue playing itself out amongst the White demographic almost more than I see it from a Black or Brown or Asian demographic. I think we all want to dismantle white supremacy, and I think that's been an outcry.

Mr. James then shared a specific instance where White educators had approached him about the idea of removing a school mascot from a local school. Mr. James shared a picture of the school mascot in question, which I would equate to Portland State University’s Viking, or Michigan State University’s Spartan. In other words, think of an old-fashioned, cartoonish and overly glorified and armored White male warrior, an oft-used symbol of predominantly White European lore and battle. Mr. James continued on:

But I’ve had White people [show me the mascot and] say ‘I think that's a form of white supremacy,’ and it's like a guy just like Fred Flintstone. It's like, I think white supremacy is more like not letting Black and Brown kids into an advanced class, which is an ongoing issue, like that's [emphasis added] more white supremacy to me than a mascot.
It seemed that Mr. James was drawn towards more institutional and structural barriers that students of Color face (and always have faced), such as access to advanced courses, while he perceived some White educators to be more focused on more cosmetic and intellectual issues.

In conclusion, in this section, “Furthering the school’s racial equity work, holding it back, or maintaining the status quo?” I highlighted the ways in which three participants perceived and described the way White educators impacted the pace and productivity of racial equity work. Among those intersecting ideas were the perceived, misguided prioritization of White people’s emotions, identity, and self-awareness work; the importance of action over words, and the role of language and differing priorities in racial equity work.

The Top Priority in K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Pacific Northwest

In this section, I highlight ideas from all seven participants regarding what they perceived to be a top priority of K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.

As we came to the end of the interviews, I found myself both compelled and a bit saddened. Compelled on the richness, dept, and complexity of the powerful ideas that all of the participants had shared both individually and collectively, and sad that we were nearing the formal end of our time together for this project. There were two final questions that I was admittedly hesitant to ask because I knew the questions were far too general and broad, similar to the opening question about how participants would personally define racial equity in the context of K-12 education. However, I also wondered if the participants would have perhaps reached a sense of deepened clarity in
regard to their thoughts and visions around K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, especially since they had just navigated hours of deep thought through the series of interview questions and conversations in “the space between” (Kinloch and San Pedro, 2014, p. 30).

The final two questions/prompts I asked the participants were as follows: “Please share your vision for K-12 school-based racial equity work in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest, in 2021 and beyond,” with the follow-up question, “If there was one thing you wanted all K-12 public school districts to know about school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity in the Pacific Northwest, what would it be?” These final questions paved the way for a variety of ideas and actions including intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, structural, and philosophical shifts and priorities. Please see Table 12 for a summary of the participants’ answers.

**Table 12**

*Top Things School Districts Should Know About Racial Equity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Summary of participants’ ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brill</td>
<td>Need more equity-based decision making; more teachers of Color; more community collaboration and dialogue on the purpose of education; more direct racialized conversations and language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Molkera</td>
<td>Need more ethnic studies classes; more formalized way of recruiting and retaining teachers of Color, and more intentionally designed communities and supports for teachers of Color.</td>
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<td>Ms. Reed</td>
<td>Need an acknowledgement and commitment to how hard the transformation will be; need to move beyond self-awareness and more towards strong pedagogy and unconditional belief in students.</td>
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<td>Ms. Alexander</td>
<td>Need to acknowledge that you can’t teach somebody you’re afraid of, or work with someone you’re afraid of. Need to be bold and center Black children, build community, and it will benefit all students, including White students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. James</td>
<td>Need to strive towards more authentic, intentional community engagement; need to seize this social, political, and racial moment in our history and times.</td>
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Ms. Free | Need schools and teachers mobilizing on behalf of students and communities, more prioritization of counter-stories and a shift towards collectivism, place-based understanding, and ethnic studies as opposed to dominant culture curriculum and instruction that can disenfranchise and marginalize students.

Mr. Douglass | Need purposeful planning to create equitable learning experiences for students. Need to implement proven research-based practices, and build a mindset and series of systematic actions that includes high expectations, support, and social and emotional care and protection.

Note. If there was one thing you wanted all K-12 public school districts to know about school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity in the Pacific Northwest, what would it be?

This section is organized by emergent topical themes and concepts, with a variety of related ideas from the participants.

More Educators of Color. I will start with a clear priority that was a recurring thread throughout much of the interviews and from many of the participants: the need for more educators and administrators of Color in the Pacific Northwest. Mr. Brill shared, “I think the recruitment of teachers of Color is paramount,” and cited ideas such as partnering with local communities and colleges, tuition reimbursement programs, and being intentional with resource allocation and usage. Similarly, Ms. Molkera explained, “I think we need a [legislative House] bill that sets aside monies for recruitment and retention of teachers of Color.” Ms. Molkera spoke more passionately about the retention aspect, as she had recalled personal struggles that she felt could have been reduced had there been more of a formal structure and support system in place for teachers of Color in predominantly White spaces. Ms. Molkera reflected:

And when these teachers [teachers of Color in small numbers] are in the [predominantly White] buildings and they're hurting, is there a therapy session? Where was the person that should have come to me? There needs to be something established for teachers of Color that is run by teachers of Color 'cause people would watch my situation in shock and not understand how it happened. But it did happen. How do we keep this from happening again? Because it's not OK, right?
There were also times when participants shared their frustrations, sometimes with humor, about how few Black colleagues they had and the consequences of that. For example, Ms. Alexander shared:

Oh my God [covers face with hands and laughs], you don't even know how many times people ask, there's a couple Black women who work here, and they ask if we’re sisters and they mistake us for each other. And I'm like she got straight hair and I have locks. How are we? [shaking head laughing]

It is worth noting that there are some current recruitment and retention efforts for teachers of Color in my home state of Oregon, specifically the Oregon Educator Equity Task Force and Report Committee which dates back to statewide legislative efforts all the way back to 1991 with what was initially called the Minority Teacher Act (Oregon Senate Bill 122). The intention of the Oregon Educator Equity Task Force is very similar to what Mr. Brill and Ms. Molkera outlined, and while there have been modest gains, the durable reality of a predominantly White teaching force has remained steady.

**The Need for and Prioritization of Counter-Stories.** In addition to more teachers of Color, some of the participants talked about the need for more amplified voices from educators and communities of Color in K-12 education. In chapter two, I discussed some of the central tenets of critical race theory, including counter-stories, which the participants found to be incredibly important and historically lacking in predominantly White spaces and systems. For example, Ms. Free shared how she once saw a regional educator spotlight article that highlighted a local kindergarten teacher who was acknowledged for, amongst several things, how she taught “rigorous standards-aligned” lessons. Ms. Free reflected on how when she thought of kindergarten, she didn’t think about “rigorous standards-aligned” teaching, but instead she thought of more
community-based, and collectivist-oriented ideas about who students are and how they play an important role in their larger community. Ms. Free explained:

When we're talking about a 5-year-old, I'm thinking if somebody talked to my community [referring to her Black community], like maybe we have some different priorities around what I want my children to understand and be at the end [of their experience]. I want my kids to know that we take care of each other, that we’re connected to the student next to us... That's the kind of system I want to be a part of.

Ms. Free’s idea about having different and more collectivist goals in education made me think of Muhammad’s (2020) work on the historical roots of literacy learning in Black communities, and how literacy was much more than just a set of skills, but “more expansive and advanced and included the goals of identity meaning-making and criticality” (p. 10). Further, Ms. Free had previously critiqued the individualistic nature and legacy of U.S public education that historically left many students and communities of Color behind. Briefly on the idea of individualism and collectivism, it’s interesting to note that a team of cultural anthropologists rated countries on a 100-point scale in seven dimensions, and the United States was number one with regard to individualism within a society (i.e. self-oriented culture, individual effort favored in learning and business, competition over cooperation, etc.) (Hofstede et al., 2010).

More specifically on the need for counter-stories, Ms. Free believed that a simple, intentional shift would have an impact. She explained:

I think that if we shift in who we’re hearing from, then there will be, then we will create a system that is more racially just and more equitable, and where outcomes are favorable to more than just the few.

Building on the idea of shifting “who we’re hearing from,” Mr. Brill also explained the need for and prioritization of counter-stories in the context of his own story and
experiences with racism in schooling, while also making it clear that it “wasn’t about him,” per say, but more so about hearing from other, often overlooked perspectives. Mr. Brill explained:

But kind of like using what I learned in CRT [critical race theory], it’s about using these counternarratives not to complain, but to create a narrative that shows a particular situation or phenomenon. Because it’s not about me, and it’s not about isolated incidents [of racism in schools]. It’s about our students… And that really requires a lot from a lot of people of Color; we need to be in a place where we feel comfortable expressing feelings and experiences in a safe way, you know, but that also does require White educators to not feel this guilt and to feel OK with being uncomfortable about the honest truth.

Mr. Brill, similar to Ms. Reed and Ms. Free earlier on in the project, illuminated a reality and tension hovering beneath much racial equity work in schools and beyond: the inequitable burden and labor of people of Color “speaking their truth” about race and racism, oftentimes to predominantly White colleagues who may not understand or perhaps do not want to understand.

Perhaps this complexity is why norms and protocols, such as Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations*, proved to be so helpful for Ms. Alexander. The reader may recall Ms. Alexander shared that when using the protocols and agreements within *Courageous Conversations*, paired with the institutional expectation and professional development that trained teachers to be able to participate in them, Ms. Alexander shared, “It worked to actually have a conversation with a colleague about race. A colleague of a different race about race. And they were pretty much guaranteed to listen… it felt fantastic.”

Mr. Brill also referenced white guilt, and its detrimental effect when White educators are faced with counternarratives, which Mr. Brill referred to as “the honest
truth.” Further, Mr. Brill clarified what he meant later on by explaining that he saw a big difference between guilt and accountability. “I think the more that we try to guilt [White] people into this work, the more that we push them away and the more that we give them space to make excuses.” Mr. Brill said it multiple times throughout our interviews in regard to racial equity work: “It’s about the students.”

Community Mobilization and Engagement. When sharing ideas about priorities for racial equity work in K-12, another emergent theme from many of the participants was an expressed desire for more meaningful and productive community collaboration, with an intentionality for engaging with and alongside communities of Color. While this may seem similar to the previously expressed need for counter-stories, it also extends beyond and above counter-stories as the participants described a reimagined partnership between schools and community that was more than simply hearing their perspectives and experiences.

For example, Ms. Free described a vision of community coalitions being made as a result of “mobilization,” a term she used often. Ms. Free detailed how schools should “mobilize” on behalf of students and communities and “create possibility” by reconceptualizing their role from seeing themselves as a teacher-to-students more towards community advocate and facilitator. Further, she explained how all students deserve individualized advocacy, counselors, and an intentional approach which included what she described as, “time spent creating a relationship with families in order to support a student and moving through a system successfully and in creating possibility.” She later shared about the AVID program (Advanced Via Individual Determination), a
program that she had seen clear benefits to but that she also conceptually had an issue with (as readers may recall her critique of individualism). Ms. Free put it well when she reimagined the school landscape, “So there wouldn't be AVID because we wouldn't need AVID. I love parts of AVID, but I only see it for that [AVID] community.” Ms. Free wanted all students to get the personalized attention and intentionality of support and community, not just the students who were in AVID classes or those that attended AVID schools.

Additionally and regarding the idea of community coalitions, Mr. James previously shared that he perceived “there is a [community] disengagement that we have to reckon with.” To address that disengagement, he mentioned ideas like family nights in Spanish, student and community voice opportunities, and Black Student Unions that would do fun things together to build community and also things like filling out FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) applications. Mr. James acknowledged it was “tricky,” though:

It's still a tricky, tricky spot to really accurately tell the narrative of our community, and I think that we have work to do in disaggregating how certain communities of Color feel about things, right?

There is also another interesting angle to consider, and that is the predominantly White educators’ both capacity and willingness to genuinely listen, which would be the first step to precede genuine change in both practices and presence. At the core, such an intentionality with community engagement seemed to also require humility to see community engagement as an instructional tool. Previously, Ms. Reed had shared, “I think that when people think that they care, coupled with the fact that they think they're
right, you can’t listen or hear something different. And that means you can't then do something different.” She then built on that idea as it connected to community and family engagement. Ms. Reed explained, “And I used the word can’t [referring to an educator’s inability to change], it really is probably a choice. So, even not treating family engagement as an instructional tool, is pretty wrapped in, centered around somebody’s convenience, not what's for the student.”

Ms. Reed’s way of differentiating between not being able to do something different, and the choice to do something different, felt important. To truly engage with and in the community would require leaving preconceived notions of knowing things like instructional or classroom management “best practices” at the door and entering with an open and humble mind. This made me think of Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of “oppressor consciousness” (p. 58), which I referenced in chapter three. Freire (1970/2000) detailed “oppressor consciousness” as those who:

…truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. (p. 60)

Further, teachers being humble and open-minded to listening and more co-constructing school and student learning priorities with/in the community would require a radical transformation and reimagined process of determining whose perspective matters, what priorities are, what constitutes “rigorous standards aligned” learning, and determining whose “standards” are essential. I presumed this was what Ms. Free meant earlier when she saw a difference between her perception of the Black community’s needs and wants for a 5-year-old and a teacher who prioritizes “rigorous standards-aligned” lessons.
That said, what could a reimagined and mobilized school community look like? As Mr. James shared earlier, how can we as educators, and especially majoritarian White educators, “reckon” with a historical disengagement with communities of Color? And finally, as Ms. Reed shared, how could educators more meaningfully use family and community engagement as an instructional tool? As referenced in Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of “oppressor consciousness,” the indispensable prerequisite for transformation is “trust of the people” (p. 60). After all, in order to create conditions where people feel comfortable, safe, and that is it worth their while to share their perspectives and experiences, people would need to feel that the potential of honestly sharing outweighed the risks of isolation and even retaliation. Such a risk/reward consideration is undoubtedly what the seven project participants had to consider when trusting me with their stories and experiences in this project.

Additionally, Mr. Brill spoke on how he believed community relationship-building could be done in the realm of racial equity, and that it would begin by asking the community what they believed was the purpose of education, and then co-constructing a vision through open, honest, and race-conscious dialogue. Mr. Brill explained:

Racial equity work has to be entrenched in the communities, so trying to create really strong bonds between the school and the community that it serves means providing space and time for families to share experiences with teachers, and with administration providing, you know, whether it's child care, language services, everything; take out all the barriers and let's actually have honest conversations with each other because that's really all it comes down to. It's just a misunderstanding of what we view as the purpose of education. And that's really where the conversation needs to start.
Perhaps that is what Wheatley (2002) meant when she wrote that, “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change - personal change, community, and organizational change” (p. 3).

Mr. Brill also shared that over the last several years, especially given his time teaching in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest, he began to realize that he viewed the purpose of education very differently than those predominantly White colleagues and community members who he felt were resisting racial equity work and progress. To Mr. Brill, racial equity work should be the priority, for a multitude of reasons. He explained:

[Racial equity] work should take priority over all initiatives because it does help raise student achievement. It does help prevent teacher burnout, you know teachers are going to want to stay in these schools and communities because the bond is there, loyalty will actually be a thing and you're not going to have teachers bounce around from school to school because they're unhappy about the relationship with the community that they serve.

Mr. Brill had interesting points that have instructive implications for the future and framing of racial equity work.

Additionally and in regard to community and coalition building, I have to say, I’ll never forget Ms. Alexander’s answer when I asked her the last question in our interview. “If there was one thing you wanted all K-12 public school districts to know about school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity in the Pacific Northwest, what would it be?” I asked. Ms. Alexander put it bluntly, especially in her first four words:

Stop being a punk. Seriously, stop being scared [laughs]. Stop being afraid to step in, what’s the word I’m looking for… [pauses] I don’t wanna say the muck and the mire, sounds like the work is gross, it's not. But don't be, don't be afraid to step into the real work, the work that it takes to build community, the work that it takes to be intentional about serving Black students. Don't be afraid to put your
Black students first, ‘cause your White students will be just fine. They’ll be just fine. This society was built for them. They will be fine. The thing is, what you do for Black students will work for all students. Just like what you do for sped [special education] students and tag [talented and gifted] students will work for all students. If you’re intentional about the way that you serve Black kids, it’s a positive effect on the entire school.

“Stop being a punk. Seriously, stop being scared.” When Ms. Alexander shared this, I immediately thought about earlier when she recalled an instance of a White teacher who didn’t want to hold a reading group with a group of all Black students because she didn’t want it to look like she was “pulling the Black kids.” Whose needs were being centered? What was the impact, not intentions, what was the impact of that action? And on a larger scale, what is the role of White fear in racial equity work? Is it a fear of the unknown? A fear of Black people? A fear of feeling like the “oppressor” or of benefitting from racial privilege? Singleton (2006) asserted that educators need spaces and opportunities where they “can engage their fears” in interracial discourse, and that each participant’s fears would be different, whether you are a White teacher who is afraid of appearing racist or a principal of Color who fears being labeled as oversensitive or too emotional (p.18). Ms. Alexander went on:

I think it [fear] is because of the perceptions that White educators have of Black people. As long as we [Black people] are viewed as substandard, as long as we are viewed as crass, and emotive, and angry, I'll say as long as we are not viewed as a person that somebody has to tiptoe around, then you know, I don't see anything changing. You can't teach somebody you scared of. You can't work with somebody you scared of.

The possibility of fear being a repellant and barrier to more authentic interracial relationships and coalitions was a hard one to accept, and when I thought about the implications on young Black students with mostly White teachers, and of the role and
harmful power of uninterrogated racial bias - which has been proven to relate to behavior expectations and disproportionate consequences for students of Color (Gilliam et al., 2016) - the calls for collaborative change and more education are impossible not to hear.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Pedagogy.** Another emergent theme throughout the interviews and in the final questions with participants was the role of intentional curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy as it relates to racial equity. First regarding curriculum, some participants shared their own experiences as students with courses like ethnic studies and the impact that such curriculum had on them. For example, and as shared in his opening vignette, Mr. James shared about his college ethnic studies classes and how they grew his “moral consciousness” and challenged him to change his own life and life’s work. Additionally, Ms. Molkera shared how excited she was to receive a grant to purchase class sets of *The Norton anthology of African American literature* to begin her school’s first African-American literature course, which then morphed into a multicultural literature course and “grew and grew” with student interest and new sections being added.

Ms. Free was also a fierce advocate for both a critical lens to curriculum and for intentionally designed classes like ethnic studies. For instance, Ms. Free shared:

I'm very critical about how curriculum is used to disenfranchise students and marginalize students. And I just think about the potential for including not just the dominant culture… And that’s why ethnic studies is so powerful, just having those conversations with students from multiple communities and reflecting on how the experience of colonization has impacted all of our different communities differently.

Ms. Free also added that having classes like ethnic studies available for students was a “tangible shift in culture” when it came to student learning experiences. She believed
classes like ethnic studies gave students the opportunity and vocabulary to discuss their lives, their lived and perhaps racialized experiences, their education, and the world around them. Ms. Free added, “And just the presence of that class [ethnic studies] is inherently disruptive, right?”

Mr. Douglass also shared how he wished all teachers were more purposeful in their planning to create more racially equitable learning experiences for their students. He expressed frustration that he believed many teachers expected to simply be handed more culturally relevant and responsive curriculum instead of doing the heavy lifting and learning themselves, which would include deeply knowing and having relationships with all of your students, knowing your instructional goals and objectives, engaging in the hunt for the right and responsive resources, and then teaching and reflecting on the process. Mr. Douglass also felt that generally there was a fairly passive teacher stance when it came to curriculum as it connects with racial equity and justice, and that teachers who were focused on simply “following the curriculum” used that as a detour and barrier to evolving their own thinking and practices to better meet the perpetually shifting needs of both the students and communities they serve, as well as the social and political times that we live in. Put differently, Mr. Douglass felt that if teachers were not personally and professionally driven with a lens of racial equity, they wouldn’t make the effort to integrate more responsive, race-conscious learning experiences in their classrooms. Mr. Douglass also shared that he believed learning from and implementing proven, research-based practices can help to “even the playing field” for students of Color. He even cited a personal favorite text and guide of his, Hammond’s (2014) *Culturally responsive*
Mr. Brill also shared some positive examples of curricular change in a particular subject area in his school district. Further, he shared how teachers of Color were intentionally invited and recruited to be part of district and instructional leadership work, and that he believed “The model is great. I love being a part of the work. It seems very genuine to me, like they [school district] are really walking the walk and talking the talk. But that [single effort in one subject area] seems pretty isolated.” Mr. Brill also shared what he viewed as a problem that he described and conceptualized as curricular anti-intellectualism. Mr. Brill shared:

So the challenge is everyone thinks that they know education because of their own experience [as a K-12 student], and especially if they are White and had all White teachers, they’re like ‘Oh, I don't see anything wrong with the curriculum. I don't see any reason to do this racial equity work because my own schooling experience was just fine. And look how I turned out.’

I agree with Mr. Brill. Sometimes it does seem that people, educators included, are more influenced by memory and nostalgia than history and criticality. As Wise (2019a) argued, “unless we learn from the past without fetishizing it - unless we take a nuanced look at the differences between past social dynamics and those we face today” then those who fight for justice “will likely continue to be frustrated by the slowness of change, or even its absence” (para. 49).

Mr. Brill also shared that he thought it was important that White students learn more about White antiracist actions and figures as well. He explained:
Not every antiracist person is a person of Color, and if we're trying to get our White students and our White community members on board, we need to show them historical examples and that you can be an antiracist and there's work that always needs to be done.

In Beverly Tatum’s (2016) Teaching white students about racism: The search for white allies and the restoration of hope, she opened with a provocative set of questions that are relevant to Mr. Brill’s sentiments. Tatum (2016) asked: “Think of a nationally known White person whom you would describe as a racist… Think now of a nationally known White person you would consider to be an antiracist activist… Do you find yourself drawing a blank?” (p. 278). Tatum (2016) closed her piece by powerfully articulating that teaching about racism needs to shift from the experiences of victims and the victimizers to the empowered people of Color and their allies, because that can create the possibility for a more just, collaboratively-built society.

Moving into pedagogy, it’s important to remember Ms. Reed’s previously detailed metaphor likening poor pedagogy and teaching to bland food, and the need for “seasoning,” especially in places where students deserve the absolute best. Ms. Reed also believed there was a “path” when it came to more effective and engaging teaching. That path included engaging, supporting, and believing in all students, and it included leaning into struggle as a necessary component of growth and success. Ms. Reed spoke of the importance of implementing “tried and true” teaching methods, and how that could be different at different times such as letting go and letting kids have ownership at times, and tightening up when explicit instruction was needed. Ms. Reed also spoke on having a critical eye to different styles and methodologies of teaching by considering the source and the intended audience. For example, when she spoke excitedly but also critically on
multi-sensory approaches to teaching and learning, she added “You gotta check, who that is [the author] and who that's working for.”

**The Role of History and Local and National Context.** Several project participants referenced the value and importance of historical context in teaching and learning about race and racism, as well as local Pacific Northwest history and context. For example, local history specifically came up with Ms. Free, Mr. Brill, and Mr. Douglass. For example, Ms. Free spoke on the historical lineage of the Ku Klux Klan in her specific region in the Pacific Northwest. She shared:

There's so many different layers that are required for us to move this [racial equity] work and disrupt, I mean because of the foundation of this system, the legacy of public education and the legacy of [the state/region]. We need to be really, really explicit that every school has so much work to do, but here in [the state/region] we have particular work, because you know folks are descended from the KKK, folks are still in the KKK here, in our communities. People are experiencing hate crimes in our communities. It's a lot to be Brown here. It's like, it's a lot [emphasis added].

In my home state of Oregon, according to a 2020 report by the Oregon Criminal Justice commission, hate crimes rose 366% in the spring of 2020 (Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, 2020). As I reflect on the fact that Ms. Free closed with, “It's a lot to be Brown here. It's like, it's a lot,” I am reminded that there were many times when my racial privilege was glaringly present throughout this project, and this was certainly one. I discuss the idea of sociohistorical consciousness and responsibility in the next chapter.

Additionally, Ms. Molkera was also a strong advocate that schools should provide robust learning experiences that included more comprehensive, pluralistic, and representative lenses on history and literature. Whether it was her African American literature or multicultural literature classes, Ms. Molkera explained that “I think they
were spaces for them [students] to look at real history, real literature, and all the different -isms [racism, sexism, classism, etc.] and to communicate, and talk… it was fantastic.”

Mr. Brill also mentioned the importance of local context, action, and history when he referenced the current social and political times as moments in our shared history, especially in the context of what students and teachers are experiencing, talking, and learning about. Mr. Brill also brought up some of his personal experiences at local protests and rallies he attended in the Pacific Northwest. Specifically regarding his experiences at some rallies for Black lives and justice, Mr. Brill shared that he was initially “blown away by the whiteness,” and by the amount of White people he saw, but he added that he also saw that as a real potential for change as well. Further, Mr. Brill explained:

It’s not a perfect state [where he lives]. There are definitely things that are wrong, but the first step is acknowledging that, right? We need to get to a point where we acknowledge that things weren't or aren’t great for everyone before we could even hope to create a better future… And for a state that's really, really White, like at least they're [majoritarian White people] trying, you know? Like that's the power of when they're seeing within themselves that there's room to grow… I really do believe that it's those White people in the middle and the people on the left who are finally realizing, like maybe I have a responsibility to our community as a whole, regardless if there's one person of Color or one thousand. So, like, while yes, of course there is plenty of work to be done, I appreciate that at the ground level we're saying, yeah, we kind of messed up and we're trying to own it and maybe we take one step forward and two steps back, but at least we're at least we're having these conversations.

While there are some examples of progress and promising legislative efforts to teach more critical and honest history here in my home state of Oregon, such as state-mandated, integrated ethnic studies standards in K-12 social sciences (Oregon H.B. 2845, 2017), with progress there is often regress. For example, Mr. Brill also mentioned, to his
dismay, the school in Utah in 2021 that initially allowed parents to withdraw their children from Black History Month learning activities until the school was met with backlash and rescinded. “Like, what the hell is going on?” Mr. Brill asked, clearly exasperated. It is worth stating that beginning in the spring of 2020 and two years following it, there are at least 35 U.S. states with legislation or legislation pending that strives to ban or restrict how teachers address race and racism in the K-12 classroom, especially with or through what some have perceived as critical race theory (Alfonseca, 2022).

Additionally, regarding the importance and power of local and racial history, Mr. Douglass shared about a more memorable and impactful staff professional development session that addressed racial equity in a way that thought deeply engaged his White colleagues. Mr. Douglass explained that they learned more critically about their region’s racial (and racist) history, and that while the content was new to many in attendance, it led to lots of engagement, processing, and important conversations. Mr. Douglass also shared more generally that he felt there was a strong need for more historical understanding because he believed that all of us, including himself, were on a shared journey of learning more about the design and historical intent of racism and why it still exists today. Mr. Douglass also urged a graceful approach to this new learning as we considered our own role, both personally and professionally, in determining the conditions and actions towards overcoming perhaps racist beliefs or thoughts instilled within us. More specifically, Mr. Douglass explained how he was encouraged by the opening chapter of Kendi’s (2019) *How to be an antiracist*, which is titled “My racist
introduction.” That opening chapter is a firsthand account of a young Dr. Ibram Kendi, and how Kendi described himself as “a dupe, a chump who saw the ongoing struggles of Black people on MLK Day 2000 and decided that Black people themselves were the problem” (p. 8). Kendi (2019) went on to urge the importance of self-reflection and self-acknowledgement, including in himself, and later stated that “Denial is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, races, and nations. It is beating within us” (p. 9). Mr. Douglass shared how Kendi’s vulnerability and honesty in being accountable to where and how he was wrong - as a Black man with his own beliefs regarding anti-Black racism - that it was encouraging to Mr. Douglass to personally continue growing while also having grace for himself and others, whoever and wherever they were in their journey.

In addition to committing to learning more historical and local racial history, a deeper look could include an even more immediate and personal lens, perhaps including one’s own culture and/or family history. Ms. Alexander had previously shared that it was obvious how Black students miss out when they have nearly all White teachers and learning experiences grounded in whiteness, though she expanded on this thought with an additional and important angle. Ms. Alexander elaborated:

I also feel like White children also miss out on the richness of diversity, and education styles, and curriculum and community engagement when they remain White-centered. Not only do students of Color miss out, White students miss out as well. I've asked lots of White people what is White culture and I've gotten a lot of different answers, but they've all been like roundabout ways of saying 'I don't know.' That has been the consensus.

After Ms. Alexander shared the above statement, I shared a brief story with her about a recent professional development session that I attended on culturally responsive teaching and a moment when the idea of white culture came up. There was an activity where we
went into random Zoom breakout rooms to share about our race and ethnicity and what it meant to us. I shared with Ms. Alexander that I was paired with two White women from the Pacific Northwest who identified as “White Americans” and both struggled to share what that meant, other than that they felt they were “just normal.” Upon hearing this, Ms. Alexander laughed out loud.

However, in all seriousness, that laugh likely masked what she already knew, and what I realize more and more each day as I continue learning and growing myself - that the same ignorance to really knowing who you are and where you’re from is not only an anesthetic to racial awareness and growth, but that ignorance can also be the brick and mortar for the durability and sturdiness of whiteness at the core of what some people view as “normal” (read: white) “America” (read: the United States). Being White is not just about biology, rather it is about choosing, whether consciously or not, a system of privilege and power (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Referencing white culture synonymously with U.S or “American” culture can problematically insulate and entrench whiteness as the perceived “norm” or “standard” in the U.S. Additionally, it is worth noting that approximately 39.9% of the entire U.S. population, or about 132,425,604 people, do not identify as “White alone” (U.S. Census, 2021).

**Learning, Doing, and Being, Both Together and Apart.** Several participants had specific thoughts and ideas about the future of racial equity work in predominantly White schools and institutions. For example, Ms. Free believed that work involving race, racism, and racial equity should be done at times in interracial settings, and at times in more homogeneous affinity spaces. Ms. Free explained:
I think about just the value of creating opportunities for educators of Color to share with one another, like to create those affinity spaces, and also to create those formal spaces like equity action teams at both the building and district levels. I think about making sure that there is opportunity for White folks and folks of Color to do their work in separate spaces as well as together. I'm just reflecting on what's been most meaningful for me personally, like in my own journey of stepping into my voice as a Black educator and then also as a person who wants to create alliances that sustain me with other educators and students.

Ms. Molkera also clearly expressed the importance and the need for intentional and at times separate spaces for teachers of Color. Ms. Molkera shared:

There needs to be something established for teachers Color that is run by teachers of Color. Because there's a secret conversation that takes place around Black and Brown people. They feel safe and they say things that are honest that they don't around White people. That's just the God awful truth. We need White advocates, and White people involved, but we need POC [people of Color] looking out for POC, because we're straight shooters and we communicate in a certain type of way.

Similarly, in Trading spaces: Antiblackness and reflections on Black education futures, Warren and Coles (2020) discussed the visionary potential of what they conceptualized as Black education spaces (BES). Further, BES can be both places (i.e. a stairway at school, or a barber shop) and practices (i.e. self-determination, self-actualization, self-efficacy), as well as traditions and opportunities, for Black educators and students to not only heal from the pain and poisons of antiblackness, but also places to strategize and resist antiblackness towards more liberation and freedom. Warren and Coles (2020) emphasized the importance of recognizing, appreciating, honoring, and stewarding BES, which clearly would benefit from the acknowledgement and support of White educators as well.
Converging Interests, Love, and Potential. Mr. Brill and Ms. Reed had a couple comments in our final interviews that I believe serve well as both closing observations and provocations regarding the state of K-12 racial equity work and where it needs to go.

First, Mr. Brill shared an idea with a connection to one of the tenets of CRT, Bell’s (1980) interest convergence (as discussed in chapter two). Briefly, interest convergence argues that without a converging interest for White people, it is unlikely and historically rare that White people would support, let alone join in efforts towards more racial justice for people of Color in the U.S. Mr. Brill proposed that the converging interest for White educators was incredibly simple: it was the students, with an intentionality for historically underserved students of Color. Mr. Brill explained:

Going back to that idea of interest convergence, we need to find ways to connect to people's common humanity. Things [regarding racial inequity in education] are really only gonna get better if we can find a way to find common interests and I think that common interest is our students. I think that's the way that we hook people to this work.

What would racial equity work look and feel like if it were authentically and relentlessly centered with and through students and communities of Color and their experiences?

What would it look and feel like it educators prioritized the outpouring of “outrageous love” (Hollie, 2018, p. 200) to students and communities, which includes not only validating and affirming students’ unique and authentic selves exactly the way they are, but also having the courage, the will, and the skill to share that love. Further, hooks (2001) shared that the most precious gift that true love offers is knowing that one always belongs. The word and concept of love, just like ally, accomplice, or antiracist, isn’t just a
thing, or a noun or feeling; it’s an action, a promise to the communities and students we serve that everyone always belongs.

Additionally, I remember towards the end of our final interview, Ms. Reed seemed to be reflecting on all the rich ideas and experiences she had shared, and she came back around to an idea similar to what she opened with: her love for learning and for kids, and her sky-high expectations for students, educators, educational leaders, and for herself. Ms. Reed shared quietly and thoughtfully:

If something is precious and it's gold, you treat it like such. Period. I don't care what you say, you have to follow me with what you do. Let's really love and learn some babies up. Let's just do that. That's it. [she paused] And there will be days when it's hard, and when it's hard let it be OK for us saying, wow, that was hard, but tomorrow's a new day. And we’re gonna hold you to it because we care. And it's worth it.

Ms. Reed then briefly shared very generally about a young male student of Color at her school, and based on the way she described the situation it seemed that he was the student who most of the staff knew, and who most of the staff struggled with. “Let me think how I can get through to him,” she pondered thoughtfully and quietly while looking off to the side, “you know he’s got this chip [on his shoulder], but that chip isn’t used to scar him and mark him… Let's really love and learn some babies up,” she smiled. It was clear that Ms. Reed never gave up on students, and that she saw every day as a new opportunity. It was clear that Ms. Reed cared, and that she deeply believed the work was always worth it.

Finally, throughout our conversations, Mr. Brill and I also discussed some of the work and influence of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who is a personal hero of Mr. Brill’s. Towards the formal end of our final interview, Mr. Brill was thinking about the roles and
impacts of majoritarian White educators, and the future of school-based racial equity work, and he shared:

I'm going to paraphrase here, but Dr. King says something like the biggest threat to equality is not like the outright racist people, it's that the White moderates in the middle will remain silent. And that's what I have seen as a positive is those White moderates in the middle are finally starting to engage in these conversations, and that's helped move it [racial equity work and racial justice] forward.

I would be remiss not to have Dr. King’s words stand on their own here, as they were penned in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” on April 16, 1963. Regarding the White moderate, King (1963a) wrote:

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the White moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the White moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Re-reading King’s letter with the framing of thinking about this project, and the roles and impacts of the majoritarian White educator in K-12 racial equity work, is a profoundly powerful and instructive exercise for me, one that makes me both critically ambitious and suspicious about where we are and where we need to go. While seemingly simple yet not so simply-achieved, Mr. Brill’s urging of humanely centering students in racial equity work, and his acknowledgement of the critical mass and potential of the moderate White educator are powerful, perpetual invitations.
Summary of the Findings and Application to the Study

In this chapter, I introduced the reader to seven outstanding, unique, and brave educators in the Pacific Northwest who opened their minds and hearts to me about their experiences and ideas in regard to race, racism, racial equity, and K-12 education, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Throughout the chapter, it was clearly established that racial equity meant many things to many people. Through this chapter, I highlighted important, complex, nuanced examples of the participants’ ideas and experiences that could be compared, contrasted, and learned from. Three themes emerged through both the individual and collective genius and wisdom of the seven participants. Theme one was “Hierarchies: Institutional presence and precedence in K-12 racial equity work;” theme two was “Living and learning, seizing and leading in historical times: The movement for Black lives and justice and COVID-19’s impact on K-12 racial equity work;” and theme 3 was “The many (white) elephants in the (class)room: The perceived and varying roles, impacts, and potential of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.”

In summary, theme one, “Hierarchies: Institutional presence and precedence in K-12 racial equity work,” explored institutional factors in K-12 racial equity work in K-12 settings in the Pacific Northwest, and included a variety of the participants’ experiences that explored the notions of responsibility and accountability in racial equity work, the role of norms, protocols, and data, the participants’ own satisfaction and dissatisfaction within and across racial equity work, and perceived barriers.
Theme two, “Living and learning, seizing and leading in historical times: The movement for Black lives and justice and COVID-19’s impact on K-12 racial equity work,” explored the role and impacts of the movement for Black lives and justice and the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on K-12 racial equity work. Many participants shared perceived examples of progress, regress, and many other experiences detailing trials and tribulations with/in racial equity work that came during these historical times. I included two anonymous, personal examples of the personal and professional toll that these events took on two of the participants, as well as many participants’ critiques on the depth and presence of a focus on racial equity, as well as a critique on the role of social emotional learning in a race-neutral manner. Additionally, I highlighted hopeful lessons learned that a few of the participants offered.

Finally, theme three, “The many (white) elephants in the (class)room: The perceived and varying roles, impacts, and potential of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest,” explored the perceived and varying roles, impacts, and potential of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. Ideas discussed included the role and presence of White peoples’ fear and emotions, Black racial realities and complexities in racial equity work; the perceived impact of educators who are White in furthering the school’s racial equity work, holding it back, or maintaining the status quo; and participants’ perceptions on the top priorities in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. With regard to the top priorities, participants shared visions for more educators of Color; the need for and prioritization of counter-stories; more community mobilization and engagement; more intentional
approaches to curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy; an increased role and understanding of history and local and national context; the benefits of learning, doing, and being both together and apart; and converging interests, love, and potential.
Chapter 5: Synthesis and Conclusion

Introduction

Because the problematic operation of racism in K-12 education is so highly complex and so historically and stubbornly entrenched, and because school-based K-12 racial equity work on a broad scale is inconsistent, difficult to measure, and has not demonstrably created more equitable experiences nor outcomes for students or educators of Color, I decided to approach the problem through multiple angles and avenues. Among the many parts and approaches taken throughout this project, I presented a brief historical account of racial inequity in public education in the United States in chapter one to illustrate that there are no systemic accidents without historical precedents. In chapter two, I highlighted how school-based racial equity work is grounded in foundational theories in the study of race and education, including critical race theory and critical whiteness studies. In chapter two, I also detailed many complex and nuanced approaches to and impacts of school-based racial equity work in K-12 settings. In chapter three, I outlined the strategic and intentional methodological approaches I took in this critical qualitative interview study, wherein I sought to most respectfully and authentically address the following research questions:

1) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report their experiences with/in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

2) How do Black and Black biracial educators in the Pacific Northwest perceive and report the participation, role(s), and impact(s) of White participants in K-12 school-based racial equity work?

Finally, in chapter four, I centered the voices and experiences of seven brilliant Black and Black biracial educators in the predominantly White Pacific Northwest, highlighting
some of their experiences with/in K-12 school-based racial equity work. Additionally, in chapter four I intentionally detailed how the actions and/or inactions of majoritarian White educators affected the participants and racial equity efforts and movements in education more broadly, something mostly missing from the literature (Gorski & Erakat, 2019).

From the beginning of this ambitious project, I admittedly struggled with funneling and synthesizing ideas and approaches down to a more accessible final product. I wrestled with hard decisions on what to include and what not to include in the project, and page counts and subsections quickly grew. For example, when studying some of the history of K-12 public education and the intersections with the racial history of the United States, I began to more deeply understand that in order to get to where we want to go, we have to know where we’ve been. That said, this paper’s exceptional length and at times genre-bending approach to dissertation and academic writing are calculated risks that I took to not oversimplify or generalize this immensely complex problem, and to ground this project in the voices and experiences of the project participants, and the plethora of powerful, critical work of many scholars of Color. Additionally, I strove to write in a way that felt more approachable, conversational, and invitational for K-12 educators, not necessarily scholars in academia, while still maintaining high academic standards. Finally, I attempted to be as authentic and vulnerable as I could be as a researcher and author, and of course as a growing learner, educator, and fallible human being as well.
Ultimately, I believe that chapter four is the heart and soul of this project, and if the reader were to read any sections in full, I would encourage them to choose chapter four. Through chapter four, I wade into the project's findings and include an ensuing discussion on a myriad of the seven participants’ personal and professional experiences with/in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest. Mostly through the participants’ own words and voices, chapter four both implicitly and explicitly highlights the complexities of school-based racial equity work, but also its promise and possibilities. Through this final chapter, chapter five, I present a synthesis of the project as a whole and offer a set of considerations and provocations regarding K-12 racial equity work, many of which are grounded in the methodological underpinnings of pragmatism (Morgan, 2007; 2014), as I discussed in chapter three.

More specifically, I draw from pragmatism by considering whether any new knowledge produced from this project can or will be useful, to whom, and whether or not the knowledge produced can be used to potentially influence educators’ behavior towards more informed, responsive, and sustained efforts in the realm of racial equity in K-12 education. I am not naive enough to think that this project will change the landscape of school-based racial equity work, and I am mindful so as not to appropriate or recycle the powerful ideas of the project participants and the abundance of critical scholarship cited throughout as my own. Instead, I strive towards a more humble, tempered pragmatism that is guided by a simple belief that this project can offer considerations, provocations, and invitations for compassionate, growth-oriented personal and professional reflection - especially so for majoritarian White educators like me. Ultimately, I agree with Morgan
(2007) that research in the social sciences should be judged by the range of actions that it makes possible. With that said, I acknowledge the very real limitations of a significantly long dissertation being the spark or provocation for such pragmatic action, but I am nonetheless committed to seeking and working towards it.

I chose to structure this final chapter’s synthesis in a less traditional way. When I reflect on my 17 years in K-12 public education, and when I think of how I have seen participants and educators engage with text(s) in the context of school-based racial equity work, I have mixed reactions. Many times and with varying results, I have seen learners read an academic article or journal, ranging from three to thirty pages, or maybe a full text or specific chapters in a book-club-like setting, and then discuss emergent themes or potential applications to their work. There are, of course, other non-text avenues like videos and guest speakers, or engaging with the arts and cultural groups and organizations that center more social and interactive experiences as well. I’ve also seen approaches geared towards a “less is more” approach, such as in the case of Gorski’s (2017) *Beyond celebrating diversity: 20 things I will do to be an equitable educator* (Appendix F), which is a two-page handout. The “20 things” are twenty different actions that educators can engage with/in regarding equity work in education, ranging from immediate and humanizing classroom practices like described in number one, “I will learn to pronounce each student’s name correctly. Students should never feel the need to shorten or change their names to make it easier for me or anyone else to pronounce them” (para. 1), to more complex and systemic practices such as number fifteen, which reads:

I will understand inequity, not just as an interpersonal issue, but as a systemic issue. Although I might not consider the fight against global sexism or world
poverty as within my purview, part of understanding students is understanding the ways conditions and inequities within the education system affect them. (para. 15)

While there are of course limitations to such a general approach as listing twenty “things,” I have seen many educators - ranging from the more reluctant to the more compelled - deeply engage with this “less is more” approach in both reflective and actional ways, as well as both personally and professionally. Just as some of Gorski’s other work inspired and shaped this project and its design, specifically his and Erakat’s (2019) *Racism, whiteness, and burnout in antiracism movements: How white racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of color in the United States*, so too will Gorski’s (2017) approach in *20 things I will do to be an equitable educator*. Therefore, a tempered pragmatic product of this project is a several page handout listing what I frame as “considerations and provocations” for engaging in K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings (Appendix G). This chapter also includes a written synthesis that explains and contextualizes each consideration in approximately a couple pages each.

Therefore, in the first half of this final chapter, I will list ten more broad, critical considerations for K-12 racial equity work in predominantly White settings. These considerations are based on the synthesis of ideas from the project participants and grounding in the literature. Additionally, many of the considerations overlap and intersect, as some of the complexities within and across the considerations are deeply woven and interconnected in a variety of ways.

In the next section of this chapter, I provide seven considerations specifically geared towards majoritarian White educators, which are mostly drawn from chapter four
under the third theme: “The many (white) elephants in the (class)room: The perceived and varying roles, impacts, and potential of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest.” These seven considerations are intended mainly for majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work and invite a reflective, active betrayal of whiteness. However, the seven considerations also have intersectional implications, I believe, for a broader audience as well when considering other majoritarian groups. For example, majoritarian able-bodied educators may find relevance in some of the considerations when considering further learning and actions towards more equity for individuals with different physical or developmental abilities. Further, in this final set of seven considerations for majoritarian White educators, I also introduce an emerging concept of critical humility, interracial comradeship, and sociohistorical responsibility. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the limitations of the project, future considerations and recommendations for research, and an offering of concluding remarks.

Synthesis of Findings


In this section, I outline 10 critical considerations and provocations for K-12 school-based racial equity work in predominantly White settings. Each consideration is followed by a set of invitations for inquiry, and a written synthesis which cites and briefly (re)states ideas from both the project participants and the literature.
1. Address the Operation of Racism in a Variety of Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Institutional, Structural, and Cultural Ways. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- Are (y)our efforts geared toward addressing the operation of racism in intrapersonal ways (e.g. interrogating racial bias or privilege), and/or interpersonal ways (e.g. relationship-building, microaggressions)?
  - What is the impact of intrapersonal and interpersonal work on both educators and on students/staff/communities of Color? How do we know?
- Are racial equity efforts also geared toward addressing the operation of racism in institutional and structural ways (e.g. racially disproportionate student enrollment in advanced courses, racially unjust distributions of access and opportunity), and/or cultural ways (dominant culture norms, values, standards, or beliefs that advantage White people and perspectives)?
  - What is the impact of (y)our efforts, on whom, and how do we know?
- Ultimately, who will (y)our racial equity efforts benefit and burden? Says whom?

After discussing racial equity in K-12 schooling more broadly with the seven participants, what they felt racial equity was and wasn’t, how they would define, and how work towards it could be both satisfying and dissatisfying, it became clear that the notion of equity, including racial equity, could mean everything and therefore perhaps nothing at all, and at times the participants seemed frustrated with that variability and unresolved-ness. For example, when speaking on his district’s equity stance, Mr. Brill explained, “[the equity stance] it’s like an attempt to say we're trying to do the right thing without really calling out what the right thing is, like let's just leave it ambiguous so enough people can interpret it however they really want to.” Put differently, if equity is abstract and ambiguous, there is space for the persistence of inequity. Perhaps this was similar to what Derrick Bell, the ‘Father of Critical Race Theory’ (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 38) meant when he recalled the words of his protagonist Geneva Crenshaw in And we are not
saved: The elusive quest for racial justice: “It appears that my worst fears have been realized: we have made progress in everything yet nothing has changed” (Bell, 1989, p. 33).

Ms. Reed also expressed frustration with how she saw much school-based racial equity work center White people processing emotions and reflections, perhaps on things like privilege or fragility. “I want to say so what, now what? Let's do this different,” Ms. Reed urged. Instead, Ms. Reed wanted to talk about classroom relationships and practices, and about students and the community, and how that work could maybe move the needle towards more racial equity. And so the question emerged: How can we be more intentional, race-conscious, and balanced in our efforts towards more racial equity in education?

This first consideration invites practitioners to engage in K-12 racial equity work with both intentionality and balance, and to strive towards race-conscious thinking and actions in our learning, work, and efforts towards achieving more racial equity. Further, it is important to be reflective on the balance of intrapersonal and interpersonal work relating to race and racism, and on the operation of more institutional, structural, and cultural racism. More specifically, intrapersonal racism could focus on identifying and wrestling with one’s racial privilege and unconscious bias, while interpersonal work could involve focusing on counter-storytelling, listening, and relationship building (i.e. “courageous conversations”). While both intra- and interpersonal work are immensely important, they may not directly impact the operation of racism in more complex and nuanced ways, and the many impacts on students and staff of Color.
Therefore, educators learning about and addressing many forms of racism is important, including but not limited to intrapersonal and interpersonal racism, as well as institutional racism that could involve looking at policies, practices, and ideologies that result in racial disparities (i.e. racially disproportionate discipline data, or racially disproportionate student enrollment in advanced courses), structural racism (i.e. unjust distributions of access and opportunity built into systems and structures, such as the previously discussed example in chapter one of predominantly Black schools closing in Chicago), and cultural racism (i.e. messaging that implies a dominant culture and white superiority through assumed norms, values, and beliefs, and through heavily utilized resources like uncritical media and school textbooks) (Dismantling Racism Works, 2021).

Finally, to bring this idea into sharper focus, I turn to the insights from Mr. James. Towards the end of his interviews, Mr. James reflected that across his career, he perceived an evolution in racial equity work from more “soft and self-work” like identity exploration (intrapersonal), to more district-wide work such as looking at race-conscious data like the enrollment of students of Color in advanced placement courses and working to identify and dismantle (institutional) barriers. In Mr. James’ opinion, these were very welcomed shifts, and can serve as instructive provocations for more intentional and balanced racial equity efforts.

2. (Re)Orient School-based Racial Equity Work Towards the Work of
Growing as Compassionate Human Beings and K-12 Practitioners. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:
• How will (y)our racial equity efforts orchestrate us to grow as people (e.g. increased empathy and inclusivity) and as K-12 practitioners?

• How will racial equity efforts impact students of Color and their everyday classroom and schooling experience? How will we know?

• What classroom and/or pedagogical practices can we work towards developing? What is the role of critical scholarship and frameworks written by educational scholars of Color?
  
  o e.g. Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant teaching, Muhammad’s culturally and historically responsive literacy.

Ms. Reed shared what she believed students need, especially those facing historical marginalization:

[Marginalized students need] teachers that are amazing. They [teachers] should have some seasoning. They should know some tricks; they should be open and willing to better practices. And that's the problem. We're not willing to have that courageous conversation. We already know we can't talk about race, but what about this? I love you. I see you. I want you to be here. But let's get something straight. Poor kids? Kids of Color? We're used to eating good food, so if you come with some kind of bland meal that tastes like yuck, you just threw it together for us? We know.

This was one of the more memorable exchanges of this entire project for me. I loved how Ms. Reed spoke so highly and creatively of the power and potential of amazing teachers, and of powerful, responsive, student-centered teaching and learning.

Consideration number two invites educators to think about racial equity work and its direct connection to classroom practices and pedagogy that impact students’ everyday schooling experience. What Ms. Reed referred to as “seasoning,” I see as transformational and powerful pedagogy and practices, and when it comes to pedagogy conducive towards more racial equity and centering students of Color, there is limitless potential for learning and action.
We educators today live and learn amongst a historic generation of educational scholars of Color who have blazed the path towards reimagining a more racially equitable and race-conscious educational system, especially in the classroom. Multiple scholars and their work are relevant, responsive, and revolutionary in this regard, including but not limited to Ladson-Billings’ (1995b, 1995c) foundational work on culturally relevant pedagogy, Lynn’s (1999) critical race pedagogy, Gay’s (2010) and Hollie’s (2018) culturally responsive teaching, Hammond’s (2014) culturally responsive teaching and the brain, Paris and Alim’s (2014, 2017) culturally sustaining pedagogy, Love’s (2019) abolitionist teaching, and Muhammad’s (2020) culturally and historically responsive pedagogy.

3. (Re)Consider Who/What is Hypervisible and Invisible in Racial Equity Work, and Different Needs and Wants. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- Who and what is hypervisible and invisible in racial equity efforts?
- Whose needs and wants are being centered in racial equity efforts?
- What intersectional* implications do race, and also ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical/emotional/developmental (dis)ability, age, economic status, and/or religious/spiritual affiliation have on (y)our equity work and learning?
  
  * Intersectional: When different aspects of identity, such as race and gender, can operate together to advantage or disadvantage individuals and communities.
- How are we responsibly centering the students and communities who navigate and persevere through marginalization, and their needs and wants?

Mr. Brill’s statement on being a Black man making him hypervisible and his needs invisible at a predominantly White school was also one of the more powerful and
unforgettable moments of this project. Additionally, Mr. James also shared about his own needs as a Black man being neglected when he had to “sit through” racial equity meetings and trainings:

…[the racial equity trainings are] mostly about self-learning, and it's mostly framed by White well-intended leaders. The impact is that very few Black, Brown and minority leaders and teachers are really getting professional development. So our [teachers and leaders of Color] growth is kind of stunted. All the antiracist work is really catered towards White leaders.

Such uncritical, undifferentiated, and whiteness-steeped approaches to racial equity work - at the expense of people and communities of Color - can perhaps be avoided by finding avenues for more honest and actionable use of basic equity lens questions such as: Who is benefitting? Who is marginalized? How do we maximize benefit and eliminate marginalization? What is the impact - not intent - and on whom? Says whom? Of course, seeking this feedback in ways that are both anonymous and safe, and striving to prove through future actions and responses that the feedback was critically read and received, are additionally important.

For example, while speaking on his own needs in racial equity work and professional development, one of my critical mentors (my colleagues and mentors of Color who provided me feedback on the craft and design of this project and who helped me recruit project participants) shared that he wished there were less trainings on “the why racial equity work is needed,” and more on racialized trauma for educators of Color and “how not to lash out” with frustrations on how the work is often carried out in ways that center whiteness. For example, he specifically shared the work of Resna Menakem (2017), author of My grandmother’s hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to
Mending our hearts and bodies. Further, my critical mentor mentioned how Menakem’s work challenges the over-intellectualization of race and racism, and instead focuses on healing from historical and racialized trauma carried in the body through practices and culture building that can improve endurance, agility, and the cultivation of self and communal discipline. Hearing my critical mentor, a Black man, share his own needs and wants, his own vulnerabilities, and areas he’d like to grow in, was a powerful reminder to stay critically suspicious of all racial equity efforts and impacts, and always to be reflective when considering whose needs and wants are being centered, how we know, who and what is hypervisible and invisible, and who is benefitting and being burdened.

Additionally, while this project centers race and the operation of racism in schooling, the notion of visibility and invisibility is intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995, 2020) and can be considered in any instance of oppression and disparate social, economic, political, or institutional inequality. For example, the following question and framing can be used in a variety of applications: How may race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical/emotional/developmental (dis)ability, age, economic status, and/or religious/spiritual affiliation factor in? What is the role of power and prejudice, and how are they expressed? Says whom and for whom?

4. Prioritize Counter-Stories* and Local Contexts with Care and Awareness.

Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

* Counter-stories are the experiential knowledge of individuals of Color and their experiences with and responses to racism.

- What opportunities are there to responsibly learn with and from counter-stories, and more local, lived, community experiences, first-hand histories, and leadership?
• What are the impacts - personally and professionally - on both facilitators and everyday practitioners of racial equity work, especially on people of Color? Says whom?
• How and in what ways are counter-stories shared, received, and respected?
• Who is explicitly and implicitly responsible (and accountable) for racial equity work in (y)our school or district?
• Who is leading and strategizing the work, and with what guiding information, perspectives, or assumptions?

A consistent, provocatively reflective question that arose for me throughout the interviews was whose responsibility is K-12 racial equity work, and to whom? Similar to consideration number three and what Mr. Brill shared regarding racial hypervisibility and invisible needs, Ms. Free shared something that, I believe, can also plague racial equity efforts across many predominantly White schools and districts across the U.S. Ms. Free explained:

You know, I very much witnessed and participated in racial equity work being the responsibility of educators of Color, framed in that deficit, like there’s something wrong with our kids rather than a systematic responsibility of all of us in the system to take care of all [emphasis added] of our students. You know, it was, Black and Brown folks were responsible for Black and Brown kids.

Ms. Free was not alone in reflecting on this (unjust) phenomenon, as Mr. Brill also shared that participating in racial equity work in predominantly White settings was “…tough waters for teachers of Color to navigate. A lot of the burden does fall on our [teachers of Color] shoulders.” That said, what does this mean for future practice and the prioritization of counter-stories at the risk of individuals and communities of Color being disproportionately and unjustly responsible, burdened, and potentially (re)traumatized?

This paper is grounded in the immensely transformational power of counter-stories (see chapter two), as the counter-stories and experiences of the seven project
participants, along with the work of critical scholars of Color, are the heart and engine of this project (see chapter four), as well as central to the construction of these considerations. When the participants reflected on the importance of counter-stories, there were some very simple, logical ideas, such as when Ms. Free shared: “You know, actually reaching out to teachers of Color and saying, what are you seeing? What do you need? What do you think students need? That doesn't happen often… It’s problematic when the folks of Color with the lived experience are not the ones leading the work, right?” Similarly, Mr. James also critiqued the frequent overlooking of local and lived experience(s) when he shared, “I think we're really dismissive of all the experiences and historical perspective and regional perspective that our local admin[istrators] of Color have.”

While I heard these ideas clearly, at the same time, I also heard other participants share how challenging it could be for them to speak and share their truth in predominantly White settings. For example, there was hesitation in Ms. Reed’s voice when she shared, “Equity work has to really get deep, and it has to get deep without it being my personal or professional assassination. If I speak up, right, I'm really, really careful.” Ms. Reed later likened the idea of speaking her truth regarding race, racism, and school-based racial equity work to “mental judo,” which was complicated by the persistent fear of offending White colleagues and potential retaliation. That said, how can racial equity work, first and foremost, value and protect the humanity and livelihood of individuals of Color so they can participate with their full and authentic selves? Further, how can racial equity work center counter-stories while also not setting any expectations
that educators of Color have to share or take the lead with racial equity efforts?

Additionally, is it fair, just, or humane to ask educators of Color to armor up against the looming threat of white fragility and share a filtered version of their truth and experiences at the risk of personal and professional retaliation and harm?

While the next consideration builds on these ideas and complexity as well, it is fair to say that critical and courageous interracial collaboration and relationships built on trust and honesty, as well as safe, anonymous information gathering, are important considerations in any efforts towards more racial equity and transformation.

5. Consider the More Subtle, Snowballing Taxation on People of Color in Racial Equity Work. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- What are the roles and expectations for people of Color in racial equity work in predominantly White settings and institutions? Says whom and for whom?
- Are people of Color being affirmed, validated, and appropriately compensated for all of their racial equity work (including more grassroots or less-visible work)?
- How and in what ways is racial equity work responsive to people of Color, their experiences, and the potential impact(s) of racialized trauma, racialization, isolation, and hostile, predominantly White racial environments?

Many participants spoke to their lived reality of being Black and Black biracial and working towards more racial equity in predominantly White institutions and settings. Many specifically shared that they weren’t interested in taking on the monumental work of educating majoritarian White educators on race and racism, nor in continuing to appease those who they perceived either didn’t believe in or authentically commit to the work. For example, Mr. Brill shared, “Honestly Brad, I'm done trying to train up White educators to do this work, like that's just not where I am in my career.” Similarly, Ms. Alexander said, “It's not my job to carry on furthering their journey [White educators
learning more about race and racism], like that's on you.” As shared previously, White learners and practitioners and their own racial consciousness can be disproportionately centered in professional learning at the expense of practitioners of Color and their needs, and as Thompson (2004) unforgettably framed it, people of Color can be unfairly positioned as “native informants and unpaid sherpas” along for the journey of white-centric racial enlightenment (p. 388).

Moreover, the work of educating White educators about race and racism comes in addition to the sometimes less visible responsibilities and realities that many educators of Color carry and endure. The cumulative impact of these responsibilities and realities is sometimes referred to as racial battle fatigue, or the toll and taxing impact - psychological, emotional, and physiological - of confronting and coexisting with racism (Smith, 2004, 2009; Kohli & Pizarro, 2020). Such contributors to racial battle fatigue can include but are not limited to educators of Color facing persistent racialization and isolation, enduring the burden of needing to be the representative of one’s race - several project participants spoke to how hard it was to be “the only one” (Black educator) - having to consistently advocate for racial justice and the rights of students and families of Color, the enduring of stereotypes, colorblindness, microaggressions, and being misread and mistrusted by predominantly White colleagues; being overlooked for jobs and institutional promotions and leadership opportunities, and the expectation of continually contributing to race or equity related school efforts and initiatives (Kohli, 2018; Kohli & Pizarro, 2020; Mabokela & Madsen, 2007; Madsen & Mabokela, 2000).
Despite the toll and taxation that racial equity work sometimes took on the participants, many of the participants still found themselves deeply connected to and involved in their school or district’s racial equity work because that is who they are and what they believe in. For example, Ms. Molkera shared, “Someone has to do it [racial equity and justice work], and if I don't do it, I beg everybody around me to come, but people are taxed.” The reader may recall that Ms. Molkera shared that she was on eight committees at the time we talked, many of which were connected to racial equity efforts.

Several of the participants also shared that they personally experienced burnout and retaliation from work revolving around race and racism in their schools and districts. For example, one of my critical mentors spoke to these less visible burdens as well as the fear of retaliation when he shared:

I go out of my way to appear approachable, go out of my way to not shit on bad ideas [about racial equity work]. I can code-switch - not gonna call these [White] folks out… Black educators are riding it out. Not gonna poke the bear, we got real live concerns about retaliation… And it’s not my job to deconstruct something that was built against me anyway.

That said, what forms of disproportionate taxation - personal and professional - are forced upon educators of Color in school-based racial equity work, regardless of the work’s intentions or aims? How are educators of Color being affirmed, validated, respected, and cared for? How are educators of Color and their perspectives, ideas, and leadership being heard and received, represented and validated, cited, and acted upon? And how is their potentially less visible work being respected by majoritarian White colleagues and appropriately compensated?
6. Formalize Racial Equity Commitments, Funding, and Professional Learning & Consider Institutional Power Dynamics. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- Does (y)our school/district/state have a formal commitment to or policy regarding racial equity?
  - If so, is the commitment operationalized and formally funded? Do staff receive ongoing opportunities for professional development and learning?
- How does institutional power and precedence, hierarchical structures, and/or school/district leadership impact racial equity work?
- How do policies or commitments change the functioning of systemic inequities?
- How do policies or commitments address on the ground needs and/or wants of students and communities of Color? How do we know?
- What is your school’s/district’s strategic approach and/or guiding framework to racial equity work, and how was it determined?

The reader may recall that some of the participants worked in school districts with formal stances and policies on racial equity, or equity more broadly, and that some participants appreciated the policies but critiqued what they perceived as a lack of accountability and consistency in their execution. Ms. Alexander was the only participant whose district had a formal policy and a specific framework for going about racial equity work - Singleton’s (2006) *Courageous Conversations* - which she shared: “That experience to me [using Courageous Conversations], not only did it change my career, my outlook on my career, but it actually changed my life… I felt validated.” My purpose in (re)sharing Ms. Alexander’s experience is not to offer an endorsement of Singleton’s approach, but more so to illuminate the benefit of a consistent framework that is an institutional expectation, not an exception. Ms. Alexander went on to describe what happened when her district began to move in a new direction:
The moment that we didn't have to do racial equity PDs [professional developments], the moment everybody didn't have to go through racial equity onboarding PD, the moment there were not directives [from the school district] as far as how you work with Courageous Conversations, as soon as all those directives left, a lot of people lost interest… The work that we did with Singleton, it was slow, but it was methodical. And I appreciated it because we had something to anchor our work to.

And so the question becomes, what is the “anchor” of your school or district’s racial equity work? Is there an anchor, or is it a wild sea of both possibility and unpredictability; where people are adrift, bobbing on whatever currents (interests, distractions, priorities) draw attention?

Additionally and with regard to frameworks or even strategies and approaches towards achieving more racial equity, Muhammad (2020) argued, “we need frameworks that have been written by people of color and designed for children of color,” attesting that a productive starting point to “get it right” with all youth is to start with the groups that have been marginalized the most (p. 11). All approaches, of course, would benefit from a critical analysis of their aims and authorship, with an intentional look at how they address whiteness and more dominant culture dispositions and beliefs.

Finally, the reader may also recall that Ms. Molkera was very knowledgeable on and active with her advocacy for racial equity related statewide initiatives and legislation, which is another consideration. For example, in my home state of Oregon, we have Oregon Senate Bill 122 (SB122, 1991), initially called the Minority Teacher Act and now called the Oregon Educator Equity Task Force and Report Committee, which works towards systemically diversifying the teacher force. There is also a formal Oregon Equity Lens (2017) from the Oregon Chief Education Office, which the Higher Education
Coordinating Commission authors professed is “a cornerstone to the State’s approach to education policy and budgeting” (para. 1). Additionally, there are multiple pieces of legislation that mandate the K-12 teaching of local tribal history (SB13, 2017), the K-12 teaching of the Holocaust and other genocides (SB665, 2019), and K-12 integrated ethnic studies standards in the social sciences that mandate all students to analyze and examine issues of discrimination, equity, racism, and prejudice (HB2845, 2017).

It is also important to note that many of the aforementioned examples, especially regarding what is taught in school, were the result of grassroots civic engagement and community-based advocacy. For example, the efforts that led to HB2845 and integrated K-12 ethnic studies standards were primarily led by high school students of Color in Oregon (June, 2017). These examples of local legislation are undoubtedly promising, yet they still may manifest as what King (1963b) critically referred to as a “promissory note” (para. 4), or a “bad check; a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’” (para. 6) without sustained commitment and follow through. Perhaps a day will come in Oregon where K-12 students will organize to collect their “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006a), and like King and the fellow marchers on Washington D.C. in 1963, the students will march to Salem, Oregon (the state capitol) “to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice” (King, 1963b, para. 7).

7. **Reconceptualize, Diversify, and Transparently Share the Data and Tools That Seek to Measure the Impacts of Racial Equity Work.** Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:
• How and in what ways can racial equity work and its impact(s) be measured? Says whom and for whom?
  o Is there a balance of qualitative (e.g. experiential) and quantitative (e.g. statistical) data?
  o How is “progress” being monitored or measured?
• How is feedback on racial equity work and the racial climate being responsibly and anonymously gathered? For and from whom?
  o What are the benefits and burdens of anonymous feedback?
  o How is the feedback reviewed, disaggregated, analyzed, shared, and acted upon?
• How can we build both trust and consistent opportunities to encourage students, staff, and community members of Color to be honest in sharing their experiences, and also to believe and expect that educators and schools will change as a result of it?

In chapter one, I discussed the problematic aspects of more traditional, and oft-cited quantitative data measures that speak to students’ “success” in school (i.e. standardized test scores which have led to the achievement “gap”), and so it is admittedly both challenging and complex when considering how to measure the impacts of school-based racial equity work. For example, how can racial equity work be qualified or quantified? Would a commitment to racial equity work and the impacts of it be able to be measured by self-reporting or other similar inputs? Could more traditional, and oft-cited quantitative data that seeks to measure “success” and “outcomes” legitimize racial equity work, or do we need to reconceptualize the use of data as a whole? Ms. Free framed what she saw as the problematic reality of data and statistics without a critical analysis when she shared:

I think that without a critical exploration of the measures, and the larger kind of sociopolitical context of schooling, it’s you know, like we don't need to look at data when you know it's going to be the same [e.g. achievement “gap,” discipline “gap”]. You know, it's like, of what use is that, ultimately?
Throughout the interviews, many of the project participants advocated for a reconceptualization of data from just grades and scores to more humanizing data such as social and emotional well-being measures, school climate surveys, student health, and student participation in extracurriculars like sports and clubs. Similar in scope and concept is Safir and Dugan’s (2021) notion of “street data,” which urges a shift from stubbornly and historically inequitable quantitative data measures to more qualitative and experiential data, more anecdotal and perhaps emotional data, more asset-based and eye-level information that can transform people, schools, and structures.

One example of such “street” data could be Gorski and DuBose’s (2021) “Equity feels like” measures, which could be quantitatively or qualitatively explored, and are applicable for students and families at school, home, and in and around the community. Imagine the possibilities if schools had authentic measures of how students honestly reflected on the following prompts:

- I am valued for my strengths and contributions.
- I am respected for who I am.
- My voice is heard and appreciated.
- I feel cared about and I care about others.
- I see myself, my family, and my community represented.
- I feel comfortable and welcomed.
- I am confident and challenged.
- I am empowered to achieve my goals and contribute to my full potential.
- I see my place and responsibility in creating societal justice.

Additionally important is who and how we are asking for people, especially from historically marginalized communities, to share their experiences. For example, several participants mentioned that their district’s surveys and other tools were not always
offered in multiple languages, and therefore were exclusionary and incomplete. Moreover and arguably a prerequisite to any means of information gathering is considering the value of and steps required to create a culture of authentic and actional listening, and relationships built on care, mutual respect, and inclusivity. One of Gorski’s (2017) 20 things I will do to be an equitable educator specifically speaks to student experience and how anonymous student feedback can also benefit classroom educators: “I will elicit anonymous feedback from students and, when I do, I will model a willingness to be changed by their presence to the same extent they are changed by mine” (para. 12). That said, how can and should educators model such a willingness to be changed by student feedback? And how can we build both trust and consistent opportunities to encourage students, staff, and community members to be honest in sharing their experiences, and also to believe and expect that educators and schools will change as a result of it?

8. Be Critically Suspicious of “Fresh Coats of Paint” Over Deeper Structural Issues. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- How can we prioritize identifying, dismantling, and rebuilding inequitable structures instead of just painting over them? How can we tell the difference between systemic and cosmetic issues?
- Given that we have finite time, energy, and other resources, what are the most important areas of focus in racial equity work? Says whom and for whom?
- How are current racial equity efforts similar to/different from those in the past year, five years, or decade? What are the short-term and long-term goals?
- What is the role and impact of institutional power and power-holders?

Muhammad (2020) memorably critiqued the idea of covering up structural problems with “fresh paint” when she argued: “The problems leading to the need for culturally relevant education have been inadequately addressed by many policies and
initiatives in education. These become fresh coats of paint on structures that are debilitating” (p. 42). This metaphor of fresh paint on broken structures struck me: How can we prioritize identifying, dismantling, and rebuilding inequitable structures instead of just painting over them?

In a relevant example, Mr. James expressed how he saw white supremacy as a more structural and institutional issue, which he perceived was different from some educators he worked with. Further, he shared an example of what he saw as more surface-level priorities and perhaps a misguided investment of energy and resources with the example of school mascots:

I've had White people [show me a school mascot and] say ‘I think that's a form of white supremacy,’ and it's like a guy just like Fred Flintstone. It's like, I think white supremacy is more like not letting Black and Brown kids into an advanced class, which is an ongoing issue, like that's [emphasis added] more white supremacy to me than a mascot.

That said, is changing a school mascot just a fresh coat of paint on a structure that is debilitating?

Mr. James’ example about mascots also reminded me of a provocative conversation I had very early in the design of this project with one of my critical mentors. My mentor reflected on a school that was recently renamed to Ida B. Wells School, and how the name change was being lauded as a major victory in racial equity work in education. My mentor's response was simple yet searing: “How would a young, Black, female Ida B. Wells do at that school named after her today?” I thought of how West (2014) described Wells as “full of prophetic fire,” that she had “an uncompromising radical spirit,” (p. 139), and that a young Wells had “a deep suspicion of authority” and a
candid honesty that came “regardless of what burden goes along with it, or whatever cost you have to pay” (p. 145). My critical mentor then explained his frustration that if all the energy and advocacy for the name change could have been put into the real problem, the structural and more systemic problem(s) that have led to a disproportionate amount of students of Color having to navigate more academic and discipline challenges at school (Anyon et al., 2014; Dee, 2005; Downer et al., 2016; Gilliam et al., 2016; Hanushek, 2016), that perhaps more of an impact and transformation could have been made.

Is this all to say that potentially insensitive mascots or schools named after problematic figures in history should remain? Not necessarily. More so, this can serve as an instructive moment to be critically suspicious of all efforts towards achieving more racial equity, the subtle structural ones and the more cosmetic, public-facing ones, and to stay curious about their impact, especially on individuals and communities of Color. Given that we have finite time, energy, and other resources, what is the most important area of focus? Says whom and for whom? This can also serve as a reminder to always consider if we are merely painting over broken structures, or working towards the long game of reconstruction. Ms. Free spoke to this critical, rigorous suspicion when she shared:

In order to achieve racial equity, we have to be really rigorous around what we examine, right? Every single piece of how schools function. How do we organize children within schools? What is meaningful learning? What is familiar and safe? Every piece along our K-12 education has to be really explored and dismantled… Racial equity would mean that we are operating within systems that reflect the values of all of the communities that we serve.

What does this look like in your school or district? What could it look like?
9. Ground (Y)ourselves and (Y)our Work in Critical, Local, and Historical Consciousness and Legacies. Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- How can the historical study of individuals and societies, and legacies of resistance and resilience, influence and guide (y)our racial equity efforts today?
- What are different types of resistance and resilience in regard to injustice, and what factors might contribute to how a person or group resists?
- How have people challenged oppression and racial injustice historically and contemporarily? How about specifically in (y)our city/county/state/region?
- What is the role of place-based education and contexts?

Mr. James, Ms. Free, and Mr. Douglass spoke about the value of knowing local history and how it connects to racial equity work in schools, which made me think of Muhammad’s (2020) text *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*, which highlights the historical roots and lessons that can be learned from Black learning and literary communities in the U.S. as early as the 1800s. Regarding historical consciousness in general, Muhammad (2020) urged, “It’s essential that all educators understand the bias and racism prevalent throughout American history so that they can interrupt it each day” (p. 150).

As a former social sciences teacher and lifelong student of history, I deeply believe in the power, potential, and instructiveness of history and place-based knowledge as a source of context and humility when considering how we learn about and work towards more racial equity in our schools and communities. Local, historical, and contemporary sociopolitical consciousness is an indispensable element to more authentically understanding our world and engaging in racial equity work to transform it.
It is my belief that such understanding can lead to more informed and sustained learning and action.

More specifically in regard to Oregon’s history, when looking at Oregon’s predominantly White racial makeup today, one cannot ignore the impact(s) of the White American theft of land and acts of violence towards tribal people in the 1830s (Lewis & Connolly, 2019), the Black exclusion laws that disallowed Black people from settling in Oregon in the 1840s, the Donation Land Act of 1850 which only guaranteed land to “every white settler...American half breed Indians included,” and an Oregon state constitution in 1859 that prohibited Black people from owning property and making contracts (Camhi, 2021; Millner, 2022; Nokes, 2021). Further, as Millner (2022) argued, “To understand later patterns of political, economic, and social inequality in Oregon, it is necessary to be aware of these early examples of race-based public policy that benefited only the state's White population” (para. 12). Oregon’s racial history is history that we all need to know, and “not just to recount all the horrific wrongs done to Black people and other people of color,” as Imarisha (2012) argued, but more so “to showcase communities of color as active agents in their destinies” (para 6). Histories and legacies matter, as do resistance and resilience.

Local, historical, and contemporary sociopolitical consciousness certainly includes a deeper knowledge of local indigenous history, and local K-12 legislation in the Pacific Northwest like Oregon’s Tribal History/Shared History (SB13, 2017) and Washington’s Since Time Immemorial (SB5433, 2015) mandate the K-12 teaching of more historically accurate and contemporary Native American history and presence,
which is promising. Additionally, Sabzalian’s (2019) *Critical orientations for Indigenous studies curriculum* is a powerful, anticolonial tool for Oregonians (and others) to consider the implications of Indigenous sovereignty specifically in the realms of place, presence, political nationhood, perspectives, power, and partnerships. Finally, as David Harrelson (2021) - a local Grand Ronde tribal member, historian and educator - so powerfully put it, Oregonians can discover many different ways to learn as a living and growing “landcestor,” or an open-minded and knowledgeable ancestor of the land one lives on (in my case, the ancestral homelands of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tumwater, Watala band of the Chinook, and the Tualatin Kalapuya, as well as many other Indigenous communities and nations of the Columbia River). Harrelson’s invitation is one that has relevance for us all, as there are many ways we can learn about and become better stewards of the lands we live upon, their histories and peoples both past and present, towards a brighter, collective survivance and future.

**10. Build and Sustain Generative Interracial Coalitions and Affinity Spaces.**

Invitations for inquiry with/in this consideration include:

- What opportunities do educators have to learn and grow both together (e.g. interracial equity teams, learning commons) and apart (e.g. racial affinity spaces)?
- How are affinity spaces recognized, appreciated, and stewarded?
- How are groups formed, and what are the purposes and outcomes of work with/in the groups? Says whom and for whom?

Ms. Molkera shared what she saw as “the God honest truth” when it came to structuring racial equity work in schools:

There needs to be something established for teachers of Color that is run by teachers of Color. Because there's a secret conversation that takes place around
Black and Brown people. They feel safe and they say things that are honest that they don't around White people.

Ms. Molkera went on to affirm that yes, there is a need for White advocates and White educator involvement, but that the need for interracial collaboration didn’t satisfy the need for “POC (people of Color) looking out for POC.”

Similarly in her advocacy for affinity spaces, Ms. Free shared: “reflecting on what's been most meaningful for me personally, in my own journey of stepping into my voice as a Black educator… I think about the value of creating opportunities for educators of Color to share with one another.” Ms. Free’s sentiments made me think of the role and presence of Black education spaces (Warren & Coles, 2020), and fugitive spaces (Stovall, 2017), as discussed in chapter four, and if they are recognized, appreciated, honored, and stewarded. Ms. Free later added, “and also [in addition to affinity spaces] to create those formal [interracial] spaces like equity action teams at both the building and district levels… to create alliances that sustain me with other educators and students.” It was clear that there needed to be spaces and opportunities for White educators and educators of Color to engage with/in racial equity learning and work both together and apart.

For example, some of the project participants attested that more intrapersonal work, for example, should be in affinity spaces. Dillard (2022) also spoke to this when she attested:

Who is a part of the sanctuary or sacred community you create will vary, but it may need to be made up of a racially or culturally homogeneous group at first: we all have a lot of healing work to do within and around those who share similar racial, cultural, and social identities. (p. 182)
Of course, it should not be assumed that all Black people or all White people will share similar experiences or ideas, as there are a multiplicity of factors and identities that impact how we see and engage with/in our worlds, both individually and collectively, and so another consideration is to think in more intersectional ways (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995, 2020). For example, number ten in Gorski’s (2017) *20 Things I will do to be an equitable educator* speaks to the idea of intersectional and more pluralistic thinking and coalition building, while still being mindful of the risk of taxation and over-dependence on those who have or are experiencing marginalization:

I will build coalitions with educators who are different from me in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, home language, class, (dis)ability, and other identities. These can be valuable relationships for feedback and collaborative problem-solving. At the same time, I must not rely on other people to identify my weaknesses. In particular, in the areas of my identity through which I experience privilege, I must not rely on people from marginalized groups to teach me how to improve myself (which is, in and of itself, a practice of privilege). (para. 10)

Therefore, simply put, there is value in the creation and sustenance of intentional spaces and opportunities for White educators and educators of Color – as well as thinking beyond racial identity – to engage with/in racial equity learning and work, both together and apart.

*Part 2. For Majoritarian White Educators: Seven Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings.*

This section outlines seven considerations specifically intended for majoritarian White educators in school-based racial equity work in predominantly White settings. These considerations were generated from conversations, with the participants, ideas from the literature, and my own personal, professional, and educational experiences as a White man in K-12 racial equity work. I have indicated after each consideration if it is an
intrapersonal, interpersonal, historical, and/or structural consideration, as I believe a balanced approach is important (as indicated in consideration one in part one). As stated previously, while these seven considerations are written mainly for majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work, the considerations also have intersectional implications for a broader audience as well when considering other majoritarian groups and inequities (i.e. majoritarian able-bodied educators learning about and engaging in disability rights work).

1. **Cultivate and Nurture a More Critical Humility.** Invitations for inquiry with/in this intra- and interpersonal consideration include:

- How and in what ways am I expressing humble openness, self-awareness, self-reflection, supportive interactions, and sacrifice towards my own growth and actions in racial equity work?
- How am I working to understand what experiences mean to people different from me, especially experiences tied to sociopolitical & historical realities like injustice and racism?
- What additional experiences could I learn from to understand people different from me more holistically, and how can I responsibly engage with/in those experiences?

When I use the word critical in front of things like humility or empathy, I am specifically drawing from the notion of criticality, which Muhammad (2020) defined as “the capacity to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations who have been historically marginalized in the world… to work towards social transformation” (p. 120). That said, in the context of White educators and racial equity work, criticality is essential as both a mindset and compass to guide inquiry, learning, and ensuing actions.
When I refer to humility, I draw from the term cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998), which originated in a call for healthcare professionals to consider power imbalances in professional relationships with patients, and to develop non-paternalistic and mutually beneficial relationships with individuals and communities from different populations. Ultimately, cultural humility is an openness, self-awareness, and egolessness; a commitment to supportive interactions and lifelong self-reflection (Foronda et al., 2016). Increased cultural humility, in the context of this project, could interrupt a more casual complicity with whiteness.

Additionally and in regard to humility, Freire (1970/2000) contended that “dialogue cannot exist without humility” (p. 90), and raised many important questions when considering the intersections of criticality and humility towards achieving more social and racial justice. Freire (1970/2000) inquired:

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?... How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group...the owners of truth and knowledge? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite...? How can I dialogue if I am closed to - and even offended by - the contribution of others? How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness? (p. 90)

These are important questions to consider and revisit often, as there is a layered social interdependence amongst individuals and educators which can be enriched by engaging with more nuanced layers of humility, together as a learning community, in an effort to flatten unjust hierarchies (Bright et al., 2020).
Within the concept of a more critical humility, I also draw from the ideas of the participants, such as when Ms. Alexander spoke to the need for White educators “building confidence and humility at the same time.” She explained:

White educators need confidence in knowing that OK, I'm gonna step in it [mess up], and listen. I'm gonna mess up. I sure am, but I'm gonna learn from it. I'm doing something different tomorrow or the next time... And also humility as in I am a slice, a tiny slice of the world... I'm not the world, and so the way that I do things doesn't have to be, you know, the standard. Why am I counting my way of life and way of being as standard? It is not. And when people realize how small of a fish they are in a humongous unimaginably big pond, but then I feel like there will be some more connection.

When Ms. Alexander challenged the idea of “standard” ways of doing things, she was critiquing the role and impact of whiteness, and the need to do so both confidently and humbly.

Finally, I believe empathy is important to consider as well. Also, I don’t mean interpersonal empathy such as sharing feelings and understanding what those feelings mean to others, but more so a historically grounded and social empathy, which warrants trying to more deeply understand what sociopolitical and historical realities like racism mean to people different than you (Chappell, 2021). When taken together, a critical humility and empathy could equip majoritarian White educators with a more historically-grounded, mindful, and generative form of compassionate inquiry in the work and learning towards more social and racial justice in education, which can involve the sacrifice of racial privilege(s).

2. **Seek and Develop Critical Interracial Comradeship.** Invitations for inquiry with/in this interpersonal consideration include:
• Considering that “It takes a village” (African proverb), who is in your “village” of seekers for more racial justice, and what is your relationship with those you work and learn with? What are the common aims that unite your “village?”

• What diverse perspectives and lived experiences are informing your individual and collective learning and efforts?

• How have you intentionally worked in solidarity with, shown reverence for, and expressed gratitude to comrades who are also members of the communities affected by the marginalization or oppression you are seeking to threaten and shift?

When speaking on the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in racial equity work, Ms. Reed shared a cautionary tale of the limitations of intersecting good intentions, caring, and majority group membership in predominantly White settings:

I think in the Pacific Northwest you just have a lot of [White] people who care, and think that they're right, and those two are counterproductive to being flexible in your mind to change yourself. If you're also culturally blind 'cause you're surrounded by people who are similar to you, it feeds into the fact that you care and that you're right. You think that you know it all, right?... [White people need to know] You are part of something that's bigger than you [racism] and you're a very important part. We need you in order to be we [emphasis added].

All of the project participants and I agreed that racial equity work must be collaborative, and that there can be unity in diversity when people with different lived experiences share common goals and a belief that we can and must do better. Similarly, Muhammad (2020) closed her text *Cultivating Genius* by reminding her readers that “transformation has to be collaborative,” and inviting them to consider the African proverb, *It takes a village*, by asking “Who is in your village?” (p. 169). Personally, I believe the keys and seeds to transformation lie within and across one’s village, and I am forever grateful to have been in community, solidarity, and relationship with everyone who was part of this project and learning.
Moreover, I reflect often about the power of interracial relationships, dialogue, and collaboration when it comes to racial equity work, especially so when considering my connections with the seven project participants and my critical mentors. I felt deeply connected with the participants through this experience, especially as we seemingly began to transcend the initially impersonal “researcher” and “participant” labels and context under which we met.

Weeks after the conclusion of the interviews, I received a handwritten note in the mail from one of the project participants. It expressed thanks for including them, and also shared that they felt a real sense of “camaraderie” with me. I had been searching for the right word to most meaningfully characterize the types of relationships that I had experienced in this project and that I believe are necessary in racial equity work in education, and it was challenging. Was it “camaraderie,” which Merriam Webster (n.d.) defined as: “a spirit of friendly good-fellowship”? It seemed to be much more than that, and while exploring synonyms, I clicked on “comradeship.”

This simple click led me down a road of (re)discovery and reconceptualization, especially so with the term “comrade” and how it can be expressed in the realm of comradeship. Further, Dean (2019) detailed that “Comradeship binds action, and in this binding, this solidarity, it collectivizes and directs action in light of a shared vision for the future” (p. 1). I later discovered Ayers’ (2020) ideas on the notion of “comrades” in which he too argued that comrades are bound by “a voluntary association characterized by discipline and courage as well as enthusiasm and joy that comes with being part of something larger than ourselves” (p. 928). “Now more than ever,” Ayers (2020) urged,
“we need to rescue ‘comrade’ from its many entanglements, and boldly deploy it for the urgent work ahead” through collective and strategic interventions against “the biggest obstacle to authentic comradeship in U.S. history…[which] is and always has been white supremacy” (p. 928). That said, when I refer to critical comradeship, I draw from Muhammad’s (2020) criticality towards better understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression to work towards social transformation, as well as comradeship in the development and nurturing of interracial collectivity and coalitions of seekers, learners, and doers towards the common aim of more racial justice in education, and thus social and racial transformation more broadly.

Additionally important is considering the necessity of interracial critical comradeship. Allen (2004) argued that for White people seeking to embody antiracism, “we [White people] must work to be welcomed to the side of people of color, whether as colleagues working for change in an institutional setting or as comrades in a social movement” (p. 130). Perhaps a benefit of working to dismantle something as large and entrenched as white supremacy and whiteness in education is that it allows for a multitude of opportunities to interrogate and interrupt it.

Ms. Reed also urged for more diverse thinking groups for the sake of everyone’s growth when she asserted, “We need to put people together that don't agree, right? I find myself after work, meeting to talk to my support group that confirms my bias. I need that confirmation. But if I can't get out of that and have somebody who thinks or lives or experiences things differently, the truth is we just can't grow well.” As discussed in an
earlier consideration, there is a value in both affinity spaces and interracial groups and work.

Ultimately, I agree with Ms. Reed that part of individual growth is engaging with the collective, diverse, contributing vitality of all towards the greater and humanizing good of a more racially just world. Perhaps along the way, we can also better recognize and soften the edges of our more harmful biases and open our minds to new ways of learning and being. Lorde (1996) wrote of the value of differences within and across coalitions when she said that differences must “be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances” (p. 7). Therefore, we’re not after the melting pot coalition here, but more so the mixed salad; a fresh and healthy unity through diversity, a solidarity that reveres individuality, and a solidarity that acknowledges and respects all of our parts, ingredients, and contributions towards the common goal.

### 3. Set (Y)our Focus on Whiteness, Not Just White People.

Invitations for inquiry with/in this structural consideration include:

- Are racial equity efforts targeting the operation of whiteness*?
  - * whiteness (structural): beliefs and actions, uncritically positioned as the norm, that privilege White peoples’ experiences, perspective, interests, or emotions.
- Or, are racial equity efforts targeting White people (individuals)? What’s the difference, how is it going, and how do you know?
- How can we actively and consciously betray the operation of whiteness in our work and being, and compassionately invite others to do the same?

As stated previously, the goal of this project is not to naively oversimplify, generalize about, or scapegoat White educators as the reason for racial inequity in education. Such a narrow approach would be an ahistorical band-aid on a historically
durable fracture in need of surgery; a focus on individual symptoms and a willful ignorance to the deeper, centuries-old disease (white supremacy and the operation of whiteness). Just as critical race theory CRT does not treat racial power “as rare and aberrational rather than as systemic and ingrained,” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiv), an over-emphasis and critique of White educators would reinforce the simplistic belief that racism is a collection of discrete or isolated acts, and that racists are mere individuals, and bad ones at that (DiAngelo, 2018).

Further, I agree with Dr. Beverly Tatum - a race scholar who has been teaching on racism in predominantly White settings since 1980 - when she wrote about the pitfalls of some antiracism efforts that are framed with a more individual and personal approach with White people, as opposed to leaning in to the more complex and systemic aspects of antiracism work. Tatum (2016) argued:

White students, in particular, often struggle with strong feelings of guilt when they become aware of the pervasiveness of racism in our society. Even when they feel their own behavior has been non-discriminatory, they often experience “guilt by association.” These feelings are uncomfortable and can lead White students to resist learning about race and racism. And who can blame them? If learning about racism means seeing oneself as an “oppressor,” one of the “bad guys,” then of course there will be resistance. Few people would actively embrace such a self-definition. (p. 279)

That said, I cite the aforementioned ideas not to say that self and peer accountability don’t matter, or that self-reflection and awareness are not necessary. They absolutely matter and are necessary. However, instead of primarily setting (y)our sights on White educators as we work towards more racial equity, let’s think bigger by allowing space for history and criticality to guide us. Let’s go after the historical operation and contemporary impacts of whiteness, in all its subtlety and veracity.
First and in a more local context in regard to whiteness, I must share that the *Oregon historical quarterly: White supremacy and resistance* (Winter 2019 special issue) is necessary reading for anyone interested in a critical, revelatory framing of Oregon’s racial history. In it, for example, Thompson (2019) detailed the ideology and system of what she called “American whiteness,” which is central in the history of Oregon. American whiteness includes conquest and colonialism, genocide, the theft of land and expansionism, enslavement, and forced cultural change and assimilation, each of which can be seen as “early forms of whiteness and, by extension, white supremacy” (Thompson, 2019, p. 360). In a more contemporary context, Thompson (2019) also outlined how inequalities from racism “can be combated with mutual cooperation” and vehement, focused attempts “to find ways to end the adoption and proliferation of whiteness,” all to threaten even the most “subtle” and “alive and well” demonstrations of white supremacy today (p. 357).

Similar to Tatum’s (2016) aforementioned challenge to antiracism approaches that can act to provoke White peoples’ individual feelings of guilt or shame as opposed to responsible action, in the *Oregon historical quarterly: White supremacy and resistance* note from the editors, Thompson (2019) stated, “[This special issue] does not put blame onto readers who are labeled as ‘White,’ but it is meant as a call to self-reflection” (p. 357), and “We [everyone] are not responsible for the past, but we are responsible for our relationship to the past” (p. 357). Such are words to live by, I believe, and have implications for both sociohistorical grounding and responsible action(s) towards more racial justice today.
Also a worthy and relevant text to consider in regard to whiteness and White people is Wise’s (2019) *The problem isn’t White people - it’s whiteness, people*, which takes a more conversationally blunt approach to arguing that antiracism efforts aren’t trying to make anyone feel bad, and that the work is called a systemic analysis for a reason. Briefly, Wise (2019) detailed how whiteness - a social, political, and cultural idea - and the ensuing laws and efforts that essentialized and legitimized whiteness, were part of a calculated, oppressive, and racist colonial project in the Americas that would keep power clustered at the top and manipulate all the others below, which even included poor Whites. Further, Wise (2019) claimed that whiteness only carried/carries weight because of the way it has been weaponized throughout history and the way society has repeatedly given it meaning. In his own words, Wise (2019) argued, “And if whiteness was constructed to justify the aggrandizing of power in the hands of elites – and it was – then whiteness is the thing that stands as inherently oppressive, not people *called* white” (Wise, 2019, para. 19).

I hope this section doesn’t read as an oversimplification of an incredibly complex topic, but more so an invitation to a lifetime of individual and collective learning and work. I agree with Thompson’s (2019) assertion that stories from history have the potential of “beginning a conversation about a complex and often contradictory history [of Oregon and more largely the U.S.],” and that whiteness is “the most vexing problem in the United States of America” (p. 359). That said, how can we actively and consciously betray the operation of whiteness in our work and being, and compassionately invite others to do the same? After all, Matias and Allen (2013) argued,
“Ending whiteness can only begin when whites take responsibility in its identification and understand its ubiquity” (p. 303).

4. Engage With/in Critical Whiteness Studies. Invitations for inquiry with/in this structural and intrapersonal consideration include:

- What are the benefits and burdens of whiteness, and of studying and learning about whiteness? Says whom and for whom?
- How can a deeper understanding of critical whiteness studies* impact (y)our work towards more racial equity in education?
  
  * This could include but not limited to white racial identity, white racial innocence, white saviorism, white fragility, and white silence.
- How are the experiences and voices of people of Color present and central in all work seeking to betray whiteness?

The initial drafts of this project had significantly longer sections on critical whiteness studies (CWS), though as a White male author, I wrestled with how to balance the act of naming and discussing whiteness without (re)centering it in hegemonic ways, and how to work towards productively dismantling white supremacy while simultaneously centering counter-stories and anti-majoritarian narratives (Jackson, 2011a). Further, I hope that this project has not centered whiteness to its own demise, and I hope that White readers will consider a dive into critical whiteness studies in their own time and way, as my own personal learning and reflection as a result of such efforts has changed my life and outlook - personally and professionally - in indescribable ways.

The following select concepts are relevant to this project and context and can be found in the literature within and across the field of critical whiteness studies. They do not represent an exhaustive list at all, and are merely the tip of the iceberg across the growing and evolving field of CWS.
White Racial Identity and Consciousness. (Allen, 2004; Eichstedt, 2001; Helms, 1990; Jupp et al., 2016; Ross, 1990a; Tatu, 2016). White racial identity and consciousness includes how a [White] person becomes aware of their whiteness, learns to accept whiteness as an important part of themselves, and develops a more critical and racially-conscious White identity in efforts towards more learning and racial justice (Helms, 1990). Additionally relevant in the context of White racial identity are Mr. Brill’s ideas on the roles of White educators in racial equity work, which included white knights and saviors, rule-followers and chameleons, resistors, and allies and accomplices, as outlined in chapter four.

White Racial Innocence. (Orozco, 2019; Orozco & Diaz, 2016; Ross, 1990a, 1990b). White racial innocence “avoids the argument that white people generally have benefited from the oppression of people of color” (Ross, 1990b, p. 301), and problematizes the notion that White people can commit to sustained racial justice work - whether systemically, institutionally, interpersonally and intrapersonally - without an honest acknowledgement that they are beneficiaries of a U.S. society birthed from white supremacy. White racial innocence, in and of itself, is a form of unconscious racism (Orozco & Diaz, 2016), and serves as a way to avoid white responsibility and accountability for historical and contemporary racial injustice.

all of which are problematic when viewed uncritically and when considering how White the K-12 teacher force is in the U.S. Allen and Matias (2013) also advocated for a deeper interrogation of the social constructions that influence White teachers’ “racial hearts” (p. 304) by asking questions such as: why do you feel the need to save, advocate, serve, or protect students, and personally, why are you the rightful one to do such a thing? Additionally, white saviorism can also position people of Color as “objects of White individuals’ humanitarian endeavors, a transaction that actually functions to dehumanize people of Color” (Spanierman & Smith, 2017, p. 609), leaving many implications for White educators when it comes to (re)considering how we trust, work, and learn with and alongside students and communities of Color.

**White Fragility.** (Accapaldi, 2007; Applebaum, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility is a White person’s response when they feel personally implicated or connected to racism in any way, which could include reactions like becoming resentful, angry, defensive, withdrawn, emotionally incapacitated, guilty, argumentative, or just plain outraged (DiAngelo, 2018). While likely triggered by discomfort or anxiety, white fragility is arguably a result of entitlement and also a result of unexamined thoughts and beliefs about race and identity (DiAngelo, 2018). Additionally, white fragility problematically centers White people and their feelings, emotionality, and beliefs on race and racism instead of centering and working to dismantle racism’s oppressive and harmful effects on individuals and communities of Color.

**White Silence.** (Applebaum, 2016; DiAngelo, 2012a, 2012b; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Sue, 2015). White silence is when White people are “exposed to the insidiousness
of whiteness,” and their ensuing silence protects their innocence and deflects their responsibility to learn and do more, both of which are tangible manifestations of complicity with white supremacy (Applebaum, 2016, p. 389). Additionally, DiAngelo (2012a, 2012b) argued that white silence is an active practice, not a passive one, which leaves White peoples’ racial beliefs underground, unexcavated, and thus suppressed from suspicion or discussion, which can restore and maintain comfort, protect privilege, and safeguard supremacy. That said, it is also important to consider white silence as part of more empathetic listening, a conceivably respectful and central part of learning and engagement particularly with counter-stories, and to juxtapose that notion of white silence with Applebaum’s (2016) critique that instead of asking “when white silence is or is not constructive,” we should really be asking “but, more specifically, for whom is it constructive?” (p. 393).

A Critical Note on CWS. As mentioned in chapter two, not all CWS work or scholars are uncritically heralded, and there are contending views about who CWS is for, and who it benefits and burdens, similar to school-based racial equity work. Briefly and for example, Hayes (2022) detailed a compelling critique to White CWS scholars in his *(To be woke, you must be awake: a critical response to White liberals)*, in which he unapologetically argued:

… this response [article] applies to any White person who thinks because they are doing what is fundamentally right [fighting against racial inequity], but later lets their whiteness show when people of color do not conform to set White standards… Whiteness and human freedom can never be simultaneously affirmed, as history has repeatedly shown us. This tough conversation about ‘getting it’ begins by challenging whiteness and ridding yourself from dependency on interpreting the world around you through the White gaze. (pp. 2-3)
That said, the aforementioned concepts, authors, citations, and critiques of work within and across the field of CWS do not serve as a complete picture, and are instead offered as an invitation for deeper and wider exploration.

5. Embrace Responsibility Towards the Untangling of Racial Legacies and Advantages. Invitations for inquiry with/in this historical consideration include:

- What is your city/county/state/region’s racial history? What can we do with the histories and realities that we inherit?
- What has it meant throughout history to be White? What does it mean for you/us to be White?
- How can our efforts and learning, personally and professionally, work to right the wrongs of a historically and racially inequitable system of public education?
- Whose primary responsibility is it to change or repair inequitable structures and systems? Says whom and for whom?

Wilkerson (2020) argued that the United States of America is an “old house,” one with a histories caste system founded upon a rigid, relentless, and repressive four-hundred years old social hierarchy; and just like the work necessitated by an old house, “we can never declare the work over” (p. 15). Further, Wilkerson’s (2020) powerfully descriptive invitation towards a more historically grounded responsibility of our “home” deserves to stand on its own, as its relevance to this project is pertinent. Wilkerson (2020) wrote:

We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, “I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves.” And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven
pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now. And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands. (p. 16)

Wilkerson’s (2020) metaphorical invitation to reckon with a historied and perhaps deteriorating home (read: country) is also an opportunity to preserve what works and reconstruct what doesn’t. Her urging towards responsibility, and at that a sociohistorical responsibility - which includes a combination of nuanced social and historical factors and legacies - is, I believe, relevant in the realm of K-12 racial injustice in public education in the U.S. and the role of majoritarian White educators.

Building on this memorable metaphor, imagine the role of a home inspector, equipped with a critical eye and perspective, and tools and experience to spot perhaps neglected areas in need of improvements. Imagine a non-judgmental yet critical inspection of your school or classroom, on the look-out for the operation of racism in any and all of its varied forms, perhaps beginning with an intentional look at (y)our curriculum, instruction, assessment, or even school’s funding streams, just like Ladson-Billings (1998) - a foundational “inspector” - encouraged us educators to do over twenty years ago. Imagine receiving the report after the inspection, with suggested next steps for maintenance and improvement, perhaps including strategies or frameworks for improvement and maintenance such as the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). What would the inspection report say about the state and future of your classroom/school? And moving forward, whose responsibility would it be to act on the findings in the report?

The reason I share this sociohistorical call to responsibility as a consideration especially for White educators - when it is of course relevant for all educators and non-
educators alike, and really people of all racial, ethnic, and social identities - is because of the glaring, unignorable role(s) and impact(s) of whiteness in K-12 education, the racism and white supremacy entrenched in our home’s/country’s history, and the disproportionately large numbers of White educators in K-12 U.S. schooling. Ms. Free spoke to the sociohistorical complexities of racial equity work, especially when considering racial realities and legacies. She shared:

There's so many different layers that are required for us to move this [racial equity] work and disrupt, I mean because of the foundation of this system, the legacy of public education and the legacy of [her state/region]. We need to be really, really explicit that every school has so much work to do, but here in [her state/region] we have particular work, because you know folks are descended from the KKK, folks are still in the KKK here, in our communities. People are experiencing hate crimes in our communities. It's a lot to be Brown here. It's like, it's a lot. [emphasis added]

Ms. Free’s words, I believe, serve as a stark reminder and invitation for critical humility, and sociohistorical empathy and responsibility with racial equity work.

Finally in regard to sociohistorical responsibility, as stated many times in this paper, I believe majoritarian White educators also have a majoritarian responsibility with/in racial equity work in education, and that the call to de- and re-construct a more racially equitable educational system should not disproportionately be on the shoulders of colleagues of Color who know personally that “racism is a visceral experience,” and one that lands “with great violence, upon the body” (Coates, 2015, p. 10). The next consideration offers a powerful opportunity for intrapersonal learning as related to sociohistorical responsibility, the operation of whiteness and white supremacy, and one’s own family history.

Invitations for inquiry with/in this historical and intrapersonal consideration include:

- What is the role of power, race, and oppression in (y)our own personal and ancestral histories? How can we use knowledge from our own histories to springboard equity and justice work today?
- How can we draw from our own ancestral lineage to (re)imagine the legacies we strive to leave?
- Could personal, ancestral, and critical learning be an intrapersonal prerequisite to engaging in more structural racial and social justice work and learning?
- Is it one’s individual responsibility to do such critical individual research and learning, or is it within the bounds of K-12 education?

Christine Sleeter, academic scholar and inventor of the term and notion of critical family history (2015), asserted that family history can be used to excavate the truths beneath historical dominant narratives and white supremacy. Further, critical family history aims to illuminate how individuals’ lives - past and present - were and are shaped by both power relationships and local culture across generations, which in turn confronts and problematizes the common practice for people of European descent to minimize the significance of race (Sleeter, 2015). Put differently, “To the extent that race and racism are endemic to any given society…” Sleeter (2015) argued, “the question is not whether race was at play historically, but rather how it was at play” (p. 4).

Moreover, both critical race theory and critical family history attest to racism as permanent and interconnected with many other intersectional forms of oppression. However, the acknowledgment of racial realism can be challenged by the minimization of race and the impacts of racism, sometimes referred to as an ontology of forgetting - that is, forgetting the history of white supremacy, racism, and historical imperialism that
White people perpetrated on individuals and communities of Color (Lowe, 1996; Pon, 2009). Further, whether through forgetting, or a conscious or dysconscious lack of one’s ancestral knowledge, Ladson-Billings (2001) argued, “Typically, White, middle-class prospective teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated” (p. 81). That said, Sleeter’s (2015) critical family history challenges one to critically inquire about their ancestors and personal histories by asking: Who else (what other groups) were around during that time, what were the power relationships among groups, how were these relationships maintained or challenged over time, and what does all this have to do with our lives here and now? (Sleeter, n.d.). Such questions actively interrupt and problematize an ontology of forgetting or ignoring stubborn historical facts, power structures, and racial realities.

The reader may recall in chapter four when Ms. Alexander said, “I've asked lots of White people what is white culture and I've gotten a lot of different answers, but they've all been like roundabout ways of saying I don't know.” Such a lack of cultural awareness can insulate and entrench whiteness as the perceived “norm” in the predominantly White U.S., as well as in K-12 education where a disproportionate number of teachers are White. Interestingly, Wise (2019) went as far as arguing that, “Whiteness has stolen our [White European-Americans] genuine European cultural identities” (para. 19). Therefore, critical family history can serve as a vehicle to engage with one’s own ancestral roots towards the (re)imagining and (re)shaping our future actions and living legacies.
Furthermore, part of critical family history involves looking through the “Four P’s” conceptual lenses: identifying what pushed your family out of a country of origin, what pulled them to the United States, what punished or marginalized them upon arrival, and what privileged or helped them? (Lee et al., 2015). Put into historical context of the “old house” (Wilkerson, 2020) of the United States, critical family history implores a critical ethnographic inquiry into exploring “How did white peoples’ seizure of Indian people’s land, enslavement of Africans, and construction of laws deriving from those racial relationships impact on the material conditions of one’s own family?” (Sleeter, 2015, p. 4).

And so, could a stronger, more critical understanding of a White, European-American’s past lead to a better sense of who they are, and more importantly, who they want to become? Additionally, engagement with such reflective ancestral learning isn’t exclusive to White European-Americans. For example, in a 2022 Pew Research report on Black Americans’ vision for reducing racism, researchers found that that only 57% of Black adults say their ancestors were enslaved, with one-third being unsure (Cox & Edwards, 2022). In a tweet, Hannah-Jones (2022) called the findings “fascinating” and noted that she was “astounded,” later arguing that 90% of U.S. Black people descend from slavery. Hannah-Jones’ (2022) tweet closes with the not so simple question: “What do we make of this?”

In the context of this project, could personal, historical, and critical learning be an intrapersonal prerequisite to engaging in more structural racial and social justice work and learning? And is it one’s individual responsibility to do such critical individual
research and learning, or is it within the bounds of K-12 public education? Dillard (2022) wrote of the power of one’s “sanctuary” and (re)membering, and that a sanctuary could be a place to research and reimagine oneself, as well as an opportunity to “wrestle with the hurt, harm, and danger, as well as the joy, resilience, and strength of our ancestors, and to acknowledge and even revise our covenants with them” (p. 183). What does this all mean for each of us?

Perhaps this is an additionally relevant space to share, as cited earlier, Leonardo’s (2004) timeless question: “if Whites do not assume responsibility for their history of White supremacy, then who can?” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 165). I share this all not out of shame or guilt in being White, but out of a sense of heightened sociohistorical responsibility as a humbly curious White man of mostly Scottish and English descent. For example, I wrestle with Laycock’s (2012) findings that of 193 countries that are currently member states of the United Nations, the British have invaded or fought conflicts with nearly 90% of them. What do I make of this? And here in the U.S., my own White European-American roots stretch from the New England region in the early colonial, revolutionary days to the midwestern Ohio valley during the U.S. Civil War, all of which is/was Indigenous land where “nothing was discovered, everything was already loved” (Wood, 2016, p. 6). What do I make of this? My own critical and autoethnographic inquiry has opened my eyes to things that simultaneously surprised and shook me, affirmed me, and challenged me to consider seeds I can plant to help develop and sustain the roots and legacies that I want future generations to inherit.
Additionally and worthy of restating in the context of this project more broadly, I don’t believe seeking more racial equity in education is just about challenging White educators (and with things like their own family history), and instead believe that a critical interrogation and deconstruction of the systemic and historical operation and impact(s) of whiteness and white supremacy is most impactful, as discussed in previous considerations.

7. Disarm Fear and Insecurity & Embrace Egolessness. Invitations for inquiry with/in this intrapersonal consideration include:

- Are there topics or issues within racial equity work that spark personal fear or insecurity? How can we take inventory of our fears and strive to better understand them through nonjudgmental, growth-oriented, critical inquiry?
- Are there opportunities to have courageous dialogue with others about (y)our fears and insecurities, both in homogeneous and heterogeneous settings?
- How can we practice and sustain compassionate inquisitiveness and adaptability when thinking about who we are what we do?
- Can we be comfortable when there is no immediate “solution” or “to-do list” regarding racial equity work and learning?

Several of the project participants mentioned how they perceived White educators’ fear in racial equity work, whether it was a fear of doing the wrong thing, or White educators’ fear of their own self-image as it related to racial equity efforts. The participants identified these fears as barriers to more authentic interracial relationships with Black colleagues, as well as salient detours away from more productive racial equity efforts. For example, when speaking on perceived barriers White educators contend with in racial equity work, Ms. Alexander shared, “I guess part of it is a [White educator’s] want to do the right thing, with the other part being self-image, fear of doing the wrong thing.” Ms. Alexander went on to say, “I feel like it's real empathy to not want to cause
further harm. But I feel like White folks are so afraid of stepping in shit, that they don't even bother to walk through the grass. That fear is paralyzing.” Ms. Alexander spoke with a clear and firm persuasion about what she perceived as “paralyzing fear,” and the dim future ahead if that fear wasn’t unlearned. She elaborated:

I think White educators are scared of Black people. I think it [fear] is because of the perceptions that White educators have of Black people. As long as we [Black people] are viewed as substandard, as long as we are viewed as crass, and emotive, and angry, I'll say as long as we are not viewed as a person that somebody has to tiptoe around, then you know, I don't see anything changing. You can't teach somebody you scared of. You can't work with somebody you scared of.

I perceived Ms. Alexander’s message as an invitation for White educators, myself included, to seek to excavate and interrogate the more historically-embedded, media- and culturally-fed racialized fear that may reside within them. Ms. Reed also spoke on the role of fear and self-image when she shared, “I think [White] people would prefer to just not even enter the conversation [on race, racism, and equity] because they don't want to risk getting called racist, and if that's where you're entering, we just will never get better, right?” Such fear would conceivably disallow any cultivation of authentic interracial relationships, and any chance at more generative, mutual understanding or action. Such fear would also disallow individuals, and I mean all individuals, to be their full and authentic selves. That said, how can White educators do the prerequisite work of looking inward and determining how racism, fear, or racial bias - whether conscious or not - are operating and affecting them both personally and professionally, before engaging in the more collaborative and communal work that interracial critical comradeship could allow for?
Similarly, Dillard (2022) spoke to such individual, inward “spirit work” when she offered this advice to educators: “As the person responsible for your students’ well-being and wholeness in mind, body, and spirit, you too must be whole. Not perfect, but having spent considerable time in reflection, careful study, and examination of your spirit” (p. 179). Perhaps only after such “spirit work” can we move into the more collaborative and actional work to center students of Color and “engage with colleagues in discovering strategies to examine and eradicate inequities and racism at the classroom, school, district, and institutionalized levels” (Singleton, 2006, p. 263). It should be noted that previous considerations outlined in this chapter challenged the centering of educators’ self-work that is steeped in whiteness, which would include working with things like White educators’ fear and self-image. This does not negate the value of such intrapersonal work, but instead urges considering how, when, and with whom this work takes place. Additionally, previous considerations also urged that self and personal identity work should be done in more homogenous affinity spaces.

**On Egolessness.** The reader may recall that “egolessness” was one of the principles outlined in the notion of cultural humility (Foronda et al., 2016), which was referenced in the first consideration for White educators in regard to cultivating a more critical humility. Further, egolessness - which has been conceptualized as a Buddhist principle - is “a flexible identity” manifested as inquisitiveness and adaptability, and it acknowledges that “the fixed idea that we have about ourselves as solid and separate from each other is painfully limiting” (Chödrön, 2002, p. 25). Egolessness challenges the limitations that the human ego can place on one’s life, relationships, and aspirations, and
upon further exploration, the concept of egolessness felt very resonant in the context of this project and specifically on the topic of what Ms. Alexander called “paralyzing fear.”

Additionally, egolessness can also manifest through training ourselves to stay more open and curious, to “dissolve the barriers that we erect between ourselves and our world” through a learned capacity to “relax with not knowing, not figuring everything out, with not being at all sure about who we are or who anybody else is, either” (Chödrön, 2002, p. 25). This concept of egolessness sung to me. The notion of egolessness gave me permission to feel more fearless in striving to engage in this project with its sky-high ambitions and my sky-high imposter syndrome at being the lead author and “researcher” or “interviewer” seeking “findings” in such a complex, historied, and nuanced topic, as well as a topic that was very personal for the project participants.

Egolessness reminded me of what I hope to convey about humility and empathy, and that we can simultaneously accept uncertainty while also taking responsibility for our own thoughts and actions. Egolessness reminded me that we can choose to welcome fear in a more inquisitive and compassionate manner, and that when we lean into our own moods, emotions, and thoughts together, in the freshness of each moment and complexity we face, we are doing the work of transforming ourselves and the world for the better (Chödrön, 2002).

Limitations of the Project

Researcher as Instrument

As in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of the research, data collection, and analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). That said, it is
both necessary and important to explicitly describe the instrument’s, or my own, positionality and framing, upon which I elaborated in chapter three and throughout the project. In brief, I have aimed to “identify and monitor” my own biases and “subjectivities” as the primary instrument in this project, and I agree with Merriam and Tisdell (2016) that there is no such thing as “eliminating” bias, but more so humbly acknowledging one’s own humanity and fallibility, one’s positionality and perspective, as well as their nuanced way of processing and sharing views and ideas (p. 16).

Further, while also discussed in depth in chapter three, it is worth briefly restating that I find both myself and this project situated amongst a constructivist epistemology, which honors each unique individual and holds their own perspective of what is “real” and “truth” based on their own conception of and perspective of reality, along with their own lived experiences. That said, objectivity was never a goal or honest possibility in this project, as there is a partialness to all knowledge, especially so in qualitative work. And so, this project strove to highlight the participants’ lived experiences, words, and expressions as the data, and as real, legitimate, critical evidence worthy of reverence and respectful consideration. I hope this statement of intentionality is helpful, as I do not want to proclaim the subjectivity of this project as a limitation since objectivity was never a realistic or intended goal of the project.

Additionally, in an effort to (re)identify my own subjectivities and positionality, as stated earlier, I am a White, male, mostly Scottish and English, middle class, native English speaking, U.S. born, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-aged, able-bodied, Unitarian Universalist, and I hope that the declaration of my positionality shines light on
and invites critical inquiry to the interpretive lenses that my multiplicity of identities allow for. I, of course, brought my own assumptions and experiences, all of which are influenced by my own social, political, racial, and cultural identities, to this project. I hope that my interior narration and elaboration throughout the project has been effective towards this goal of transparency, though I also recognize the real risks of overly centering my own thoughts and perspective, as well as how such an effort significantly increased the length of the project, I hope not to the point of disengagement or inaccessibility to the reader.

Additional limitations of this project, as stated in detail in chapter three, were the racial and power dynamics at play. More specifically, as a White, male, doctoral student, and former school administrator and current school district employee at one of the larger school districts in the Pacific Northwest, interviewing a group of Black and Black biracial educators, the majority of whom are female, about their experiences with racism and racial equity work in a predominantly White region and system certainly had entangled power dynamics. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) issued a warning about the limitations of a privileged researcher when they argued, “Participants in studies of marginalized groups… are often suspicious of those [researchers] who are members of the dominant culture doing research on people of oppressed groups. They often worry about the researcher’s agenda and how they will be portrayed as participants” (p. 64). Therefore, I strove to actualize this project as being done with the participants, not on them, as I attempted to center principles and concepts from more humanizing research and approaches (Paris & Winn, 2014). Further, I also strove to embrace a criticality, humility,
and sociohistorical responsibility in the aims and actions of this project as I learned more about what I came to cherish and describe as critical humility and interracial comradeship towards more racial justice.

Finally, with regard to limitations and the researcher as instrument, I believe one of the most challenging but simultaneously compelling parts of this project was selecting which of the participants’ quotes, stories, and experiences to include in chapter four, which doing so alone was certainly steeped with my own subjectivity. Rewatching all of the Zoom interviews and reviewing transcripts from the seven participants’ interviews - which totaled over twenty hours of video and hundreds of pages of transcription in sum - made me crave a thought and reflection partner, and co-authors, as making those decisions independently inspired much imposter syndrome. Further, I agree with Bringedal Houge (2022), who argued that a qualitative researcher’s task to re-present information (to present something again from the participants) is naturally both reductionist and incomplete: “all writing about social phenomena, people, and contexts is reductionist—or filtered—by the writer” (p. 7).

Additionally, bell hooks’ (1990b) words, as cited in chapter three, hovered throughout my mind regularly throughout the drafting and revising of this project, especially chapter four. hooks (1990b) critiqued such “re-presentation” of another’s experiences when she critically wrote on research:

I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own… I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (p. 243)
That said, even with an attemptedly hyper-critical disposition and self-imposed awareness to try to keep this project manageable with page counts and aims, chapter four ended up totaling over one-hundred and fifty pages alone, and that included rounds and rounds of cuts of quotes from the participants that I initially wanted to include. It is worth sharing that after I shared a draft of chapter four with all the individual participants, one participant wrote me back with:

Looks great Brad, thanks so much for being so thoughtful and for taking the time to highlight all of that! Man the next time I consider going for my doctorate, I’ll revisit this chapter and the amount of work you’ve done to talk myself out it lol! That is a TON of work, great work but wow!

It is my sincerest hope that I did some semblance of justice in the sharing of some of the participants’ experiences for the greater good of racial equity work in education, and that this final product is both instructive and generative in some way for those who engage with/in it. I also hope that I do not discourage any (additional) future doctorate students in their potential pursuits!

**Non-generalizable Findings**

This is a qualitative interview study with a fairly small group of project participants, and so the findings of this project are certainly not generalizable about Black or Black biracial educators, nor about White educators. Instead, I hope that the seven project participants’ experiences, as shared, amplify their tremendous range of knowledge, ideas, and perspectives, through both similar and contrasting ideas and visions. Specifically regarding honoring diversity and individuality in learning with and from others, in her text *The spirit of our work: Black women teachers (re)member*, Dillard (2022) offered the following question for critical reflection: “How have I
prepared to approach the realities of Black women’s lives in specific ways, with the attention that geographies, sexualities, economic class, languages, and other differences require?” (p. 181). In this project and only speaking to geographic differences, from the four Black and Black biracial female participants, there were a range of diverse geographic lived experiences that stretched from the U.S. Pacific Northwest, South, and Midwest, as well as to parts of Africa. This is all to simply say that none of the “findings” as discussed are generalizable whatsoever, that they were never intended to be, nor could they ever be.

Additionally, although I wrote frequently about White educators, I tried to avoid blatant generalization about White educators as a group. My aim was to emphasize that with majoritarian group membership and privileged social capital, in this case a dominant and disproportionate racial group membership in the teacher force and entangled racial history and privileges in the U.S., comes majoritarian responsibility. I hoped to strike an invitational tone and approach to fellow White educators, though the success of my attempts can only be decided by the reader. That said, despite this project’s lack of generalizability, I do hope that the findings and considerations of this project, to some extent, will serve as revelatory and provocative invitations to all educators, especially White ones, for critical reflection and sustained action. I also believe that the experiences of the project participants, as shared through their own words - admittedly reduced and re-presented (Brignedal Houge, 2022) - should be taken as gifts of anonymous, nuanced truths and histories, each with their own lessons and considerations to take away, act upon, and be deeply grateful for.
Virtual and Historical Realities and Limitations

As shared in chapter four under the second theme “Living and learning, seizing and leading in historical times: The movement for Black lives and justice and COVID-19’s impact on K-12 racial equity work,” the times in which the interviews took place were historically significant for a myriad of reasons. The late winter and early spring of 2021 was when the movement for Black lives and justice seemed to be at a crossroads as Derek Chauvin’s trial loomed, as additional ugly forms of racism reared their heads in other ways, and the nation seemed to be holding its breath, continuing to debate the lessons learned from arguably the largest social justice movement in the history of the U.S. (Buchanan et al., 2020). I believe this cannot be understated or underscored more clearly than in the text message I received from one of the participants, as cited in chapter four. I share it again here:

hey Brad, i am feel [sic] overwhelmed with the trial of Derek Chauvin, the release of the body cam[era] footage of the police killing of Daunte Wright and more news surfacing about Black Army officer held at gunpoint. I am trying to be more aware of my energy balloon and I think our scheduled interview will only add to that stress. Can we reschedule for tomorrow?

The events of and movement for Black lives and justice was taking a deeply personal toll on the participants in real and raw ways, and I humbly accepted that as an instructive lesson learned in and of itself. The participants’ time and energy was a finite resource, and I wanted to respect that as best as I could.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements forced all the interviews to be on Zoom, which of course limited more authentic and genuine relationship building to take place more organically. This was evident in the first phone
call I had with Ms. Reed, as she closed our chat by saying that she had to look into my eyes before she more formally committed to take part in the project (which we had to set up through Zoom). Additionally, during the late winter and early spring of 2021 when many of the interviews took place, educators had been in comprehensive distance (virtual) learning for about six months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, and many educators expressed a level of personal, professional, and emotional exhaustion that was hard to describe.

Because of these major and intersecting realities, the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movement, time felt more precious, especially when asking people to engage with additional screen time after full work days, as educators were already logging more screen time than ever before in their careers. I imagine if we would have been able to meet in person, under different circumstances, the conversations and relationships with the participants may have played out differently, and the project may have stretched over a lengthier period of time. However, because of contextual realities and the participants’ availability, many of the interviews took place across two sessions, and not three as I originally envisioned in the design that was influenced by phenomenological qualitative interview methodology (Seidman, 2016).

Additionally, it should be noted that three of the participants’ interviews were in one very long session, some stretching close to three hours, which was perhaps not ideal but real in the way they played out. I acknowledge that qualitative interviews can benefit from engagement over an extended period of time, so as to allow for both the participants and researcher to develop ideas and themes, however, I strove to prioritize being
reflexive and responsive, and can confidently say that my conversations with the participants were rich with depth, even with the contextual limitations discussed. Green’s (2014) notion of double-dutch methodology, as shared in chapter three, seemed to be in operation during this project, as I found myself “keeping time and rhythm [with participants],” expecting interactions to be “complicated, contextually stylized, and improvisational,” and inviting “reflexivity, relevance, and reciprocity” (p. 149). That said, I have no regrets on how things played out with the participants, but instead genuine gratitude for the time and space we had, even if limited and virtual.

**Missing Voices and Perspectives**

Through this project, I strove to investigate K-12 school-based racial equity work, yet I only included seven Black and Black biracial educators’ experiences, and there was only one White researcher and author. Of course, additional voices and perspectives would have greatly broadened and deepened the project and its ensuing findings and considerations. Additionally, while this project centered race and specifically the experiences of seven Black and Black biracial educators, that came at the exclusion of any individuals from other racial groups. That said, this project ultimately did not include or address other racial groups, nor other multiplicities of social identity, including their intersections, including but not limited to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical/emotional/developmental (dis)ability, age, economic status, and/or religious/spiritual affiliation, all of which have implications of their own in terms of equity, power, opportunity, and inclusion. Finally, my work in this project does not incorporate the voices of any students or young people, whose lives and futures we
ultimately serve in the realm of K-12 public education, and so more humanizing work with young people, as so powerfully framed in the work of Paris and Winn (2014), has limitless potential in the realm of pursuing more racial equity in K-12 schooling as well.

**Future Considerations and Recommendations for Research**

In this project, I attempted to design and carry out a more locally- and contextually-situated critical study of K-12 school-based racial equity work in the Pacific Northwest, as well as one that took a more intentional look at how the actions and/or inactions of majoritarian White educators affected both their colleagues of Color and racial equity efforts and movements in education more broadly, something mostly missing from the literature (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). While I am eager to act on the emergent considerations and provocations of this project, and also deeply humbled to have been able to work and learn with such incredible project participants, critical mentors, and a supportive university community, there are several types of future and deeper research in which I hope to see and one day learn from in other studies and scholarship.

First, this race-based project was solely investigated, compiled, and authored by me, a single White author. The subjectivities to such individual and personalized authorship are vast, as well as the limitations of having a White author write about racism (as discussed in depth throughout the project). While the voices and lived experiences of the participants serve as the roots and wings of this project, future projects with more authors and lead inquirers, and prioritizing diverse perspectives and voices, will carry much more weight, wisdom, and authentic, collaborative knowledge.
Second and as mentioned previously in the section on limitations, future projects could include a wider and deeper participant group that involves more than Black and Black biracial participants and more than a sole White author. Parker and Lynn (2016) argued that qualitative critical race inquiries should consider “widening the lens” (p. 150), that is, taking into account more and additional perspectives other than the Black-White paradigm, which future projects could certainly build upon.

Third, Mr. Brill shared an insight that I believe is worthy of consideration with regard to additional exploration and scholarship. When Mr. Brill pondered the complexity of being included in K-12 racial equity work that didn’t address his needs as a Black man, he wondered aloud, “Do you tell staff of Color like ‘hey, you don't need to participate in this [racial equity work] because it's going to be traumatic,’ but then not all staff of Color are there in their journeys of self-discovery.” Mr. Brill then directly challenged the notion of essentialism with teachers of Color in racial equity work when he shared, “Like just because you are a teacher or educator of Color doesn't mean that you're bought into social justice.” This is certainly scholarship that is and should be authored by critical scholars and practitioners of Color, and could build on work such as Cherry-McDaniel’s (2019) *Skinfolk ain’t always kinfolk: The dangers of assuming and assigning inherent cultural responsiveness to teachers of Color*, which is rooted in Black feminism and indigenous studies. Briefly, Cherry-McDaniel (2019) argued that all teachers need systematic and explicit training in cultural responsiveness and sustainability to better reach students of Color, and that:

We must acknowledge that although teachers of color may be exposed to similar lived experiences as students of color by virtue of their positions in settler
colonialism, there is no guarantee that their thinking is synchronous with their future students’ thinking. (p. 250)

Similarly, Paris and Alim’s (2014, 2017) work on culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes that the majority of asset-based pedagogy research has ignored the shifting and changing contemporary practices of young people, because after all, no generation of students has ever grown up like the generation of students that we are all hoping to reach today. That said, continued and future research could continue to explore the racial dynamics of educators of all races engaging with more culturally responsive practices and other related racial equity work with and for the students of today’s generation.

Finally, future projects could be much more focused and intentional by identifying certain aspects of K-12 school-based racial equity work to focus on (i.e. student experiences or outcomes, teacher retention, interpersonal or institutional racism, etc.), as well as specific roles of educators pursuing them (i.e. classroom teachers, administrators, district office employees, etc.). I previously cited Ladson-Billings’ (2009) *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, and was inspired by Ladson-Billings’ more personalized and humanizing approach of highlighting individual teachers capable of teaching and improving their students’ lives, and what happens in those special places where teachers “get it right” (p. vii). Further, I think such an approach of highlighting more specific and contextualized examples of educators who act as “dreamkeepers” in a variety of roles in education would be powerful. For example, throughout this project, the participants shared a wide range of ideas and experiences related to racial equity work in general, ranging from grassroots student groups to reconceptualizing data, and that was because the net that I cast was admittedly large and
vast when I asked about “racial equity work” in more generalized terms. Future studies could highlight more specific and contextualized educator efforts, such as Theoharis and Haddix’s (2011) mixed study of qualitative and autoethnographic methods that highlighted six White principals who “made strides in raising student achievement, creating a climate of belonging for students, staff, and families, and increasing access to learning opportunities for marginalized students” (p. 1332), or Patton and Jordan’s (2017) study that highlighted the work of a Black female administrator leading school-based racial equity work with a predominantly White staff. Perhaps more intentional and specific projects could offer readers more approachable and accessible vignettes of educators that could serve as more relevant “mirrors and windows” (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. ix) to invite more engagement, reflection, and action-planning from their readers and fellow educators.

Concluding Remarks

My late father, Jerry Parker, died while I was in the midst of conducting interviews with the project participants. He was a lifelong educator, poet, and social justice activist, and he embodied humility in a way that deeply shaped both me and this project, as well. My father once wrote that, “Wisdom is learning to love the truth hunt,” which feels especially pertinent to my experience throughout this project. More specifically, I think what I have found so deeply compelling and personally transformational about this project is the revelatory and generative gift of truth and wisdom that has been generously shared with me from the seven project participants, to whom I am forever indebted on a personal and professional level. This project invited me
to slow down and humbly and closely listen, perhaps like never before in my life or career. This project gave me the permission to accept my smallness and subjectivity, and to be reminded about the vastness of the world and how different people experience it and seek to better it. This project restructured my brain and being to never forget to consider the layered nuances of intent and impact, benefits and burdens, and that adding “says whom and for whom?” to the end of just about every statement I declaratively make or curiously wonder about changes everything. Additionally, this project invited me to continue wondering and learning about criticality, comradeship, humility, empathy, history, and responsibility, all in new and powerful ways.

Throughout this project, I found myself deeply drawn back to bold and brave leaders of Color who have led the fight toward more racial justice for centuries. For example, close to one hundred years ago, DuBois (1926) wrote (as cited in Love, 2019, p. 1), “We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?” (para. 4). DuBois’ (1926) words hang over this entire project as a reminder for me, and all majoritarian White people in the United States and in the field of K-12 education, to embrace a critical humility, especially on issues regarding race and racism, when witnessed or experienced through our white gaze.

Additionally, this project has undoubtedly transformed the way I see, process, and inquire about race, racism, history, and perspective, and the way that I attempt to humbly, respectfully, and responsibly seek counter-stories and the invaluable lessons and wisdom they offer. Moreover, and in the context of White educators and racial equity work, this
project has also solidified my unconditional acceptance that because I cannot see things the way that people of Color can and do, like DuBois (1926) attested, that the only way forward is steeped in humanization and humility, caring and listening, community and counter-narratives, and an uncompromised belief in the power of learning about and seeking better together.

When reflecting back on my experiences as a student, generally speaking, my K-16 and graduate school education oozed whiteness. My learning experiences and mostly White teachers avoided the inconvenient truth of systemic and institutional racism; they kept me comfortable and complicit, and they strengthened my white supremacy-laced consciousness and my naivety to realize that race (still) matters, and that something was (and still is) very wrong and unjust in the U.S. and in the world of education. Additionally, I went through my undergraduate and two master’s degrees in education without ever learning about the powerful works of critical race scholars in education or the evolving fields of culturally relevant and responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 1995c; Gay 2010). Why not, older and wiser me wonders? Only in my own learning and my Ed.D. experience did I truly begin to see and hear, and grow, and realize what I had been missing for so long: critical perspectives, scholars of Color, frameworks in education written by critical scholars of Color, and counter-stories as critical, legitimate, and forever necessary. And while I don’t solely blame my K-16 and graduate school education as the lone culprit(s) in my racial naiveness growing up as a White man and educator, I do say loud and clear that they were anesthetics to my racial awareness and growth.
In recognition of the importance and liberatory power of the voices and experiential knowledge of people of Color, in his foreword to DiAngelo’s (2018) *White fragility: Why it’s so hard to talk to White people about racism*, Dyson lamented that the ideas and concepts that DiAngelo (2018) wrote about in her New York Times bestselling text are really just “... what so many Black folks have thought and believed and said over the years but couldn’t be heard because White ears were too sensitive, White souls too fragile” (p. x). This recognition and provocation that countless people of Color that have resisted against and risen in spite of racism’s ills “couldn't be heard” should serve as a call to all White people, and really anyone else interested in racial justice work, to lean in. To respectfully and responsibly seek, listen, learn, and commit to the “truth hunt” and collaborative (re)building of a more just, honest world.

Historically speaking, West (2014a) argued that racial advancements in U.S. history have always been grounded in “Black prophetic fire” through leaders like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Ida B. Wells. West (2014b) clarified, “A leader is somebody who has to jump in the middle of the fray and be prudential, we hope, rather than opportunistic. But a prophetic person tells the truth, exposes lies, bears witness and then, usually, is pushed to the margins or shot dead” (para. 3). Such Black “prophetic” leaders were glossed over in my K-16 education, or as West (2014b) may say, my teachers “deodorized” (para. 1) their true messages. These powerful Black leaders and scholars have always been here, both throughout U.S. history and throughout the history of public education. Why did most of my predominantly White K-16 and graduate school teachers and professors not share
more of their brilliance with us? Was it because they just didn't know, as they maybe had been denied access to knowing themselves? Or did they know, but chose to divert our attention? Regardless, and as Tatum (2016) argued, there are ways we can seek to restore hope when teaching about racism, and it lies in collectivity and diversity:

Teaching about racism needs to shift from an exploration of the experiences of victims and victimizers to that of empowered people of color and their white allies, creating the possibility of working together as partners in the establishment of a more just society. (p. 286)

This project was a gift of opportunity on my own truth hunt, a gift of opportunity to learn with and from seven incredible, empowered Black and Black biracial educators, and to further see how I can work and contribute with and alongside them, as well as on my own.

Additionally, I would be remiss not to share that the foundational work of critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989, 1995, 2020) intersectionality profoundly opened my mind and heart to a sustained life of more complex and nuanced truth-hunting, as well. Crenshaw introduced intersectionality over 30 years ago, and in an interview with *Time* in 2020, she was asked: “What advice would you give the average person about what they can do today to help achieve more equality in America?” While I may contend with the uncritical characterization of “the average person” in the United States as framed in the question, Crenshaw’s (2020) response is an offering of clarity and an invitation to anyone who works towards more social and racial justice:

Self-interrogation is a good place to start. If you see inequality as a “them” problem or “unfortunate other” problem, that is a problem. Being able to attend to not just unfair exclusion but also, frankly, unearned inclusion is part of the equality gambit. We’ve got to be open to looking at all of the ways our systems
reproduce these inequalities, and that includes the privileges as well as the harms. (para. 15)

That said, when I speak of majoritarian White educators and write of a majoritarian responsibility in racial equity work, I find resonance in Crenshaw’s (2020) mention that “unearned inclusion” and the associated privileges it affords are something to critically consider as well in all justice efforts. Also, when I speak of racial equity work, I really mean committing to the larger work of racial justice in education and beyond.

Further, I also agree that an intersectional lens in justice work with a race-conscious lens is important to consider, as injustice and oppression rear many heads. In a powerful and relevant critique of whiteness and a call for more intersectional awareness and action, Thompson (2019) asserted:

In America, being White has long been the standard, the norm, the universal image and framework through which the nation's institutions have been conceptualized. Conversely, those who are not White know and sense that the perspectives of Whites are the standard. In the same way, someone with a disability knows that the world is designed around people with a certain ability, or women know that our society offers greater opportunity for people who are labeled as male, or someone who is not heterosexual knows that heterosexuality is assumed. It is the same way with White skin and supremacy in America. (p. 357)

That said, critical inquiry into all intersectional discriminatory and oppressive practices and realities in K-12 schooling requires a more complex commitment to better understanding how such practices affect people and systems impacted by marginalization and oppression. Such work would include identifying and working to eliminate racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of bias and discrimination. Ultimately, “Intersectionality is simply about how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life”
(Crenshaw, 2020, para. 13), which is simply unjust and unfair, and in the reimagining of and work towards more justice, “things might actually have to change for equality to be real” (para. 13). That said, what is the best way to approach redistributing resources and opportunities (power, access, money, etc.) from more dominant groups who are accustomed to having abundance, and where power has historically been clustered? How can we swim in solidarity against the current of individualism towards more collectivism through a lens of fairness and justice, not sameness?

As educators, our careers in K-12 education and beyond offer infinite opportunities to seek and hunt truth towards the actualization of more justice inside the school walls and beyond. When thinking about racial equity in education, Mr. Brill put it simply:

I think of racial equity as a decision-making process that uses the lens of the most marginalized student, so whoever that is in your district, we need to be looking at what it's like to be that student and creating things around that idea.

Mr. Brill’s invitation to critically and responsibly center students navigating (perhaps intersectional) marginalization, and the more implicit message that doing so will require us educators to be comfortable with the uncertainty of what that may truly require in our efforts to “create things” and perhaps (re)create ourselves along the way, is the work and opportunity of our lifetimes.

Perhaps such an acceptance of uncertainty and of a world filled with nuanced and diverse realities is where we can find the courage to embrace and accept what we don’t know in our efforts to learn more, grow more, and teach better. Perhaps such a lifelong journey of learning can help us as educators to reconnect with and reimagine our why
(why we became teachers, why we do what we do), turning it into a conscious manifestation of radically-inclusive hopes and actions to learn, grow, transform, and lead with and alongside our students and families. Put differently, to work towards being the best educators we can be, whether we conceptualize that as striving to embrace more culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 1995c), culturally responsive (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014; Hollie, 2018), culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017), and/or culturally and historically responsive (Muhammad, 2020) pedagogy and practices, we must humbly open our hearts and minds beyond limit.

I must be honest in clearly stating that neither this project nor I have any solutions to offer regarding racial inequity in education, whether considering its historied and unjust past or its durable present reality. Perhaps this project’s ultimate contribution is to provoke deeper and more critical suspicion and action regarding the human-created predicament of race, racism, and injustice, and how racism operates in K-12 schooling. Perhaps a more heightened awareness can continue to invite a humble acceptance of our personal responsibility, and to look at our own mind and actions curiously and compassionately as we work to dismantle racism in both ourselves and our spheres of influence, a goal of which there is no ultimate end. Perhaps we can simultaneously accept our individual smallness without wincing while also being enthusiastic about our collective and communal capacity for change.

Ultimately, the generative knowledge and considerations this project provides regarding racial equity work already exists in the knowledge of people and educators of Color in K-12 schools and communities across the U.S. That said, in spite of my
ambitiously well-intentioned hopes and visions and validity checks within this project, I will still get some things wrong. And when I do, I will strive not to be astonished nor indignant to the critical responses or reactions that this project receives, especially from people of Color, as I agree that such astonishment or indignation to critical feedback from those with lived and experiential knowledge of race and racism would just be letting whiteness carry the day (Hayes, 2022). Additionally, I acknowledge that some may read this project and as a result demonize White educators, and forget their/our humanity and fallibility, and how whiteness has also influenced and limited us to more authentically see history in all of its “nuance, error, and humanity” (Coates, 2015, p. 70). I would argue that whiteness has also limited how we (White people) see our current selves in all of our nuance, error, and humanity as well. That said, I hope that by taking a concerted and purposeful effort towards inviting majoritarian White educators to be critically suspicious of whiteness, and of racial equity efforts and their own thinking, that the risk is worth the reward, and the result is more critical White educators and a critical mass movement towards more racial justice in our schools. As shared in chapter three, I hope this project can serve as a springboard, not the ceiling, to deeper learning and questions, engagements with/in and across complexities, and collective, interracial efforts towards more racial equity in schools.

In closing, and for me personally, I can confidently say that this project has (re)illuminated to me that nothing ever sums or wraps itself up the way I naively think it may. However, in that perpetually-shifting space between intentions and impacts, between enthusiastic naiveness and grounded, humbled wisdom, is an opportunity and a
reminder to never give up on yourself or your learning. A reminder that before any attempts at changing the world we must do the real work of changing ourselves. This project has also helped me more deeply connect with my own nuanced humanity and humility as a growing, learning, curious, imperfect, and also committed and capable piece of the larger puzzle. And so, as Greene (2001) once said, “I am what I am not yet” (para. 1), and while this project has reached its imperfect and unfinished “end,” I remain growing, wondering, learning, and unfinished in my own lifelong truth-hunt.

Finally and with regard to racial justice work and movements in education and more broadly, I find radical hope when I (re)center history in my memory, and remember those that committed their lives and livelihoods towards more truth and radically inclusive humanization. The unforgettable words of abolitionist Frederick Douglass from his mighty 1852 piece, *The meaning of July fourth for the negro*, carry weight in this regard. Douglass’s urgings against incrementalism and for radical reform, reckoning, and sustained action is something to consider in regards to racial injustice and racial equity work today. Douglass (1852) urged:

> It is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced. (p. 41)

Perhaps this project can be one tiny action, a mere drop of rain in symphony with other brewing storms and thoughts that amplify the past and present calls towards criticality and a more radically inclusive embracing of humanity and equity. Guided by the blaze of the “prophetic fire” (West, 2014a, 2014b) of those that have come and fought and
struggled for progress before, perhaps we can breathe present life on the embers of our predecessors’ resilience and ingenuity, and breathe new life on the potential of who we are orchestrating ourselves to be. Perhaps we can learn how to best access our own strength and ingenuity when writing our chapters of history, our lesson plans, and action and growth plans, all of which become part of our ultimate contribution. However, none of this work can be done alone, but instead with and alongside those that we are lucky to call our village, in committed community, comradeship, and sustained solidarity; with an unapologetic urgency towards progress and towards better. To the seven project participants, my critical mentors, and my supportive university community, my deepest thanks for guiding me along the truth hunt, and for all you do and are.
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Appendix A: Invitation Letter to Pilot Study Participants

Dear X,

I hope this finds you and your family well in these trying times. As this current racial justice moment and movement in our history unfolds, and as I consider the many implications on our country and educational system, I can’t help but think of the work we did, and what we hoped it would accomplish in the quest for more racial equity. I also often reflect on my role, my shortcomings, my limitations and biases, and the varied impacts that my role and impact had (or didn’t have), for better or worse.

I am writing because I would love to connect about a project I’m working on that will take what I’m calling a critical, suspicious, and ambitious look at the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators (like me) in racial equity work in K-12. I would love to chat with you about the project, some of the things I’ve been reading and learning, and to perhaps conduct a pilot interview with you. Ultimately, the project will involve a set of interviews with four to five educators of Color (in addition to you) to share some of their experiences with racial equity work. It is my hope that the project can open up an honest, critical talk about the roles and impacts of White educators, whether intended or not. I am also hoping that you could perhaps help me connect with some other educators of Color that have participated in the district’s racial equity work.

With your recommendation and consent, I would reach out to them and invite their participation in the project, which would include a series of two to three interviews regarding their experiences with racial equity work. The interviews will focus on the complexities and uniques of site-based racial equity work, in predominantly-White institutions, all with an intentional, critical eye for White educators and their roles and impacts, whether intended or not. It is my hope that I can model humility and responsibility in being a White educator who claims to believe in better, and as someone who is willing and ready to push and grow the work with and alongside my White peers and colleagues. Your insights, and the insights of other educators of Color, are the heart and soul of this project.

Participation is, of course, entirely voluntary, and I will be safeguarding all participants’ identities through several measures that I will share in detail with all involved, including you. Confidentiality, professionalism, and meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and connection is of the utmost importance in this work. I hope that this project will spark more dialogue, but more importantly more action, in regard to more responsive, productive, and relevant racial equity work in K-12 systems, as well as intentional considerations and understandings for majoritarian White educators to better work and learn with and alongside their colleagues, students, and families of Color.
With all of that said, if you are not interested in participating, please just let me know and you will receive no further communication from me. If you are interested in connecting more, please email or text me back, and let me know how you would like to proceed.

Also, if you have any questions about the project, you can contact either me or my doctoral advisor, Anita Bright (abright@pdx.edu). I really appreciate your consideration here, and hope all is well with you and your family.

Take good care.
Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Project Participants

Dear X,

I hope this finds you and your family well in these trying times. My name is Brad Parker and I am a friend and former colleague of Y’s. I am also currently working on a doctorate in curriculum and instruction at Portland State University, where I am researching racial equity work in K-12 settings.

More specifically, I am interested in taking a critical look at the roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators (like me) in racial equity work in K-12. When I reflect on my time co-facilitating racial equity work as an assistant principal, and on my role and the impacts it had (or didn’t have), for better or worse, I realize that I need to do more to invite and challenge my White peers and colleagues. I would love to chat with you more about the project, as Y shared your passion, commitment, and contributions to racial equity work in education, and recommended you as an important person to connect with and learn from.

After we chat and if you are perhaps interested in being part of the project, we’ll schedule a series of two or three 60 to 90 minute interviews spaced about a month apart. Each interview will build upon the last. Additionally, a major focus of the work is to take a critical lens to majoritarian White educators, and their roles and impacts both on the work, and on you as a colleague. I am hoping to connect with approximately 8 to 10 teachers for this project, and at the end of all the interviews, I will invite you to read and provide feedback on anything I wrote before I share it with anyone, for the purposes of both accuracy and integrity.

Participation is, of course, entirely voluntary, and I will be safeguarding all participants’ identities through several measures that I will share with you in detail and in writing. Confidentiality, professionalism, and meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and connection is of the utmost importance in this work. I hope that this project will spark more dialogue, but more importantly more action, in regard to more responsive, productive, and relevant racial equity work in K-12 systems, as well as intentional considerations and understandings for majoritarian White educators to better work and learn with and alongside their colleagues, students, and families of Color.

With all of that said, if you are not interested in participating, please just let me know and you will receive no further communication from me. If you are interested in connecting more, please email me back, or text/call me at the number below, and let me know how you would like to proceed. Also, if you have any questions about the project, you can contact either me or my doctoral advisor, Dr. Anita Bright (abright@pdx.edu). I really appreciate your consideration here, and hope all is well with you and your family.

Take good care.
Appendix C: Consent Form for Pilot Interview Participants

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: The roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work: A critically suspicious and ambitious inquiry.

Population: Adults, Interviews

Researcher: Bradley J. Parker, College of Education Portland State University

Researcher Contact: pbrad@pdx.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully review the information provided on this form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary Consent.</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose.</strong> The purpose of this research is to investigate school-based efforts towards more racial equity with a critical eye for the roles and impacts of White educators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration.</strong> It is expected that your participation will last approximately one to two months, given that you will participate in a pilot interview and several potential check-ins following thereafter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures and Activities.</strong> You will be asked to participate in a series of two to three one-on-one pilot interviews with me via Zoom, scheduled at mutually convenient times, and lasting approximately an hour to an hour and a half each. You will also be invited to review the findings of the project and provide feedback (if you would like).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Risks.** Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include unlikely but possible professional ramifications, although your identity and participation in the project will remain anonymous.

• **Benefits.** Some of the benefits that may be expected include collaboration and connection with other Portland-area racial equity-minded educators, and advancing the knowledge and approaches of racial equity work in K-12 public education.

• **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.

**Why is this research being done?**
You are being asked to participate because you are a trusted colleague, leader, and strong advocate for school-based racial equity work. In this project, I am prioritizing and centering educators of Color and their experiences with racial equity work. About eight to ten people total will take part in this research.

**What happens to the information collected?**
Information collected for this research will be analyzed by the researcher as part of a dissertation. While this dissertation will eventually be published and disseminated in online research databases, all identifiable information of participants will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the exclusion of any personal identifying information.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**
I will take measures to protect your privacy including the use of pseudonyms to hide any and all identifiable information. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, I can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

To protect the security of all of your personal information, I will maintain records of personal information (such as phone numbers and email addresses) on password-protected electronic devices. Despite these precautions, I can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information.

Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information. These individuals and organizations include the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research and my doctoral advisor, Dr. Anita Bright.

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**
Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from participation at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

**Will I be paid for participating in this research?**
You will not receive monetary compensation for participating in this research.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**
If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Brad Parker  
pbrad@pdx.edu

**Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?**
The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity  
PO Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207-0751  
Phone: (503) 725-5484  
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400  
Email: psuirb@pdx.edu

**Consent Statement**
I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for
myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent prior to me continuing in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

______________________  ____________________
Name of Adult Participant  Signature of Adult Participant

____________
Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

______________________
Name of Research Team Member

______________________
Signature of Research Team Member

____________
Date
Appendix D: Consent Form for Project Participants

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: The roles and impacts of majoritarian White educators in K-12 racial equity work: A critically suspicious and ambitious inquiry.

Population: Adults, Interviews

Researcher: Bradley J. Parker, College of Education
Portland State University

Researcher Contact: pbrad@pdx.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully review the information provided on this form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide to participate.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Purpose.</strong> The purpose of this research is to investigate school-based efforts towards more racial equity with a critical eye for the roles and impacts of White educators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Duration.</strong> It is expected that your participation will last approximately four to five months, given that interviews will be spread out over the course of this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Procedures and Activities.</strong> You will be asked to participate in a series of two to three one-on-one interviews via Zoom, scheduled at mutually convenient times, and lasting approximately an hour to an hour and a half each. You will also be invited to review the findings of the project and provide feedback (if you would like).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Risks.** Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include unlikely but possible professional ramifications, although your identity and participation in the project will remain anonymous.

• **Benefits.** Some of the benefits that may be expected include collaboration and connection with other Portland-area racial equity-minded educators, and advancing the knowledge and approaches of racial equity work in K-12 public education.

• **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.

**Why is this research being done?**
You are being asked to participate because you were identified and/or recommended as a strong advocate and participant in school-based racial equity work, and you meet the criteria being an educator of Color who works/worked in the Pacific Northwest. About eight to ten people will take part in this research.

**What happens to the information collected?**
Information collected for this research will be analyzed by the researcher as part of a dissertation. While this dissertation will eventually be published and disseminated in online research databases, all identifiable information of participants will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the exclusion of any personal identifying information.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**
I will take measures to protect your privacy including the use of pseudonyms to hide any and all identifiable information. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, I can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

To protect the security of all of your personal information, I will maintain records of personal information (such as phone numbers and email addresses) on password-protected electronic devices. Despite these precautions, I can never fully guarantee the confidentiality of all study information.

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**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**
Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from participation at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

**Will I be paid for participating in this research?**
You will not receive monetary compensation for participating in this research.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**
If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Brad Parker
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Office of Research Integrity
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
Phone: (503) 725-5484
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400
Email: psuirb@pdx.edu

**Consent Statement**
I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for
myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent prior to me continuing in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

______________________ ________________
Name of Adult Participant

______________________
Signature of Adult Participant

____________
Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

______________________
Name of Research Team Member

______________________
Signature of Research Team Member

____________
Date
Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your journey to becoming an educator, and your journey growing as an educator. How did it start and where would you like to see it go?

2. How would you personally define racial equity in the context of K-12 education and schooling?

3. I'm curious about your experiences with your school's/district’s efforts towards achieving more racial equity. How were/are racial equity, and “racial equity work,” contextualized and defined at your school/district?
   a. What does school-based “racial equity work” look like? Feel like?

4. To what extent were/are established norms or practices present in your school’s racial equity work?
   a. Follow-ups: How did your school/district establish and measure goals and/or ongoing results of the school-based racial equity work?
   b. To what extent was “data” collection and analysis used? And what constituted “data”? For whom and by whom?
   c. How was accountability defined in your school’s/district’s racial equity work? For whom and by whom?

5. Please briefly describe your school’s/district’s racial equity team (current or past) and what you know about the team’s work (their goals/tasks/initiatives). (You can speak to this in general, and/or by mentioning specific things without any personal or school/district/regional identifying information, please).

6. I’m curious about your satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with your school's/district’s racial equity work. What would you say are the biggest breakthroughs, or moments of satisfaction or growth, that you’ve perceived with your school’s racial equity work? How about struggles?
   a. Can you share any examples? (personal and/or professional)
      (You can speak to this in general, and/or by mentioning specific things without any personal or school/district/regional identifying information, please).

7. Were there (or are there) any barriers for more effective or productive racial equity work at your school/district? If so, how would you describe the barriers?
a. Do you have any ideas or strategies to reduce (some/any) of those barriers?

8. One goal of this project is to honestly confront the complexities of school-based efforts to achieve more racial equity in K-12 public schools in the Pacific Northwest. At your school site/district, how would you describe the perhaps varying role(s) and impact(s) of educators who are white in regard to the school’s racial equity work?
   a. Can you share any memorable or noteworthy attitudes, actions or inactions, or behaviors of educators who are white in your school’s racial equity work?
      (You can speak to this in general, and/or by mentioning specific actions/occurrences without any personal identifying information, please).

9. In your experience, to what extent did/do educators who are white further the school’s racial equity work, hold it back, or maintain the status quo?
   a. Can you share any examples?
      (You can speak to this in general, and/or by mentioning specific actions/occurrences without any personal identifying information, please).

10. Throughout your experiences in school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity, what changes and/or major differences have you noticed over time?
   a. Can you share any examples?
   b. How has your school’s work been impacted, if at all, by the recent evolution of and upsurge in the movement for racial justice and Black lives?
   c. How about by COVID-19? Or any other recent events?

11. Please share your vision for K-12 school-based racial equity work in K-12 in the Pacific Northwest, in 2021 and beyond.
   a. Follow up: If there was one thing you wanted all K-12 public school districts to know about school-based efforts towards achieving more racial equity, what would it be?
   b. Have we missed anything that you’d like to discuss or share?
The Equity Literacy Institute is an EdChange initiative.
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Beyond Celebrating Diversity:
20 Things I Will Do to Be an Equitable Educator

1. I will learn to pronounce each student’s name correctly. Students should never feel the need to shorten or change their names to make it easier for me or anyone else to pronounce them.

2. I will step out of my comfort zone by building a process for continually assessing, reflecting upon, and challenging my biases, prejudices, and socializations and how they influence my expectations for, and relationships with, each student, family, and colleague.

3. I will review all learning materials, ensuring that they are free of bias whether in implicit or explicit forms. When I find bias in required materials I will encourage students to recognize and analyze it.

4. I will learn and teach about the ways people in the subject areas I teach have used their knowledge to advocate for either justice or injustice.

5. I will reject deficit ideology—the temptation to identify the problem of outcome disparities (such as test scores) as existing within rather than as pressing upon marginalized communities. I will remember that such disparities do not result from supposed deficiencies in marginalized communities, but instead are symptoms of structural educational and social conditions. This means I must find solutions to these problems that focus, not on “fixing” marginalized communities, but on fixing the conditions and practices that marginalize communities.

6. I will teach about issues like racism, sexism, poverty, and heterosexism. Despite false perceptions that younger students are not “ready” for these conversations, I will begin doing so at the youngest ages. Students from marginalized communities already are experiencing these problems and witnessing their families experiencing them.

7. I will understand the relationship between intent and impact. Often, particularly when I’m in a situation in which I experience privilege, I have the luxury of referring and responding only to what I intended, regardless of the impact I’ve had. I must take responsibility for and learn from my impact because most individual-level oppression is unintentional. But unintentional oppression hurts just as much as intentional oppression.

8. I will reject the myth of color-blindness. As uncomfortable as it may be to admit, I know that I react differently when I’m in a room full of people who share many dimensions of my identity than when I’m in a room full of people who are very different from me. I must be open and honest about this reality, because those shifts inevitably inform the experiences of the people with whom I interact. In addition, color-blindness denies people validation of their whole person.

9. I will keep in mind that some students do not enjoy the same level of access to educational materials and resources, such as computers and the Internet, as other students. I will be thoughtful about how I assign homework.
10. I will build coalitions with educators who are different from me in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, home language, class, (dis)ability, and other identities. These can be valuable relationships for feedback and collaborative problem-solving. At the same time, I must not rely on other people to identify my weaknesses. In particular, in the areas of my identity through which I experience privilege, I must not rely on people from marginalized groups to teach me how to improve myself (which is, in and of itself, a practice of privilege).

11. I will improve my skills as a facilitator so that, when issues such as racism or heterosexism arise in the classroom, I can take advantage of the resulting educational opportunities.

12. I will elicit anonymous feedback from students and, when I do, I will model a willingness to be changed by their presence to the same extent they are changed by mine.

13. I will not essentialize students from identity groups different from my own. Despite the popularity of workshops and literature that suggest that we need to know only one dimension of a student’s identity in order to know her learning needs, culture, and proclivities, such a presumption is dangerously simplistic. There is no such thing as a singular, predictable “culture of poverty” or Asian “learning style.” One’s racial identity is not a reasonable predictor of her interests or gifts. I will refuse these simplifications.

14. I will offer an integrated equity-based curriculum, not just during special months or celebrations, but all year, every day.

15. I will understand inequity, not just as an interpersonal issue, but as a systemic issue. Although I might not consider the fight against global sexism or world poverty as within my purview, part of understanding students is understanding the ways conditions and inequities within the education system affect them.

16. I will encourage students to think critically and ask critical questions about all of the information they receive, including the information they receive from me.

17. I will challenge myself to take personal responsibility before looking for fault elsewhere. For example, if I have one student who is falling behind or being disruptive, I will consider what I am doing or not doing that might be contributing to their disengagement before blaming their behavior or effort.

18. I will work to ensure that students from marginalized communities are not placed unjustly into lower academic tracks. I will fight to get them into gifted and talented programs. Better yet, considering that three decades of research demonstrate that tracking benefits only the five percent of highest achievers, I will fight tracking altogether.

19. I will advocate for equity for all underrepresented or marginalized students. Equity is not a game of choice; if I am to claim that I am committed to equity, I do not have the luxury of choosing who does or does not have access to it. For example, I cannot fight effectively for racial equity while I fail to confront gender inequity. And I can never be a real advocate for gender equity if I duck the responsibility for ensuring equity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students. When I find myself justifying my inattention to any group of marginalized people due to the worldview or value system into which I was socialized, I know it is time to reevaluate that worldview or value system.

20. I will celebrate myself as an educator. I can and should also celebrate every moment I spend in critical self-reflection about my teaching, however challenging it may be, because it makes me a more equitable educator. And that is something to celebrate!


10 Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings

01 Address the operation of racism in a variety of intrapersonal, interperson, institutional, structural, and cultural ways.

02 Connect the work of growing as compassionate human beings and K-12 practitioners.

03 (Re)Consider who/what is hypervisible and invisible in racial equity work, and different needs and wants.

04 Prioritize counter-stories and local contexts with care and awareness.

05 Consider the more subtle, snowballing taxation on people of Color in racial equity work.

06 Formalize racial equity commitments, funding, and professional learning & consider institutional power dynamics.

07 Reconceptualize, diversify, and transparently share the data and tools that seek to measure the impacts of racial equity work.

08 Be critically suspicious of “fresh coats of paint” over deeper structural issues.

09 Ground (y)ourselves and (y)our work in critical, local, and historical consciousness and legacies.

10 Build and sustain generative interracial coalitions and affinity spaces.

Acknowledgement: Thank you to the brilliant project participants, and the scholarship - especially from critical scholars of Color - that inspired and helped me to co-construct these generative ideas, all of which are invitations for critical and compassionate inquiry and action, not solutions or to-do’s. The following pages offer guiding questions for each.
10 Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings

01 Address the operation of racism in a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, structural, and cultural ways.

- Are (y)our efforts geared toward addressing the operation of racism in intrapersonal ways (e.g. interrogating racial bias or privilege), and/or interpersonal ways (e.g. relationship-building, microaggressions)?
  - What is the impact of intrapersonal and interpersonal work on both educators and on students/staff/communities of Color? How do we know?
- Are racial equity efforts also geared toward addressing the operation of racism in institutional and structural ways (e.g. racially disproportionate student enrollment in advanced courses, racially unjust distributions of access and opportunity), and/or cultural ways (dominant culture norms, values, standards, or beliefs that advantage White people and perspectives)?
  - What is the impact of (y)our efforts, on whom, and how do we know?
- Ultimately, who will (y)our racial equity efforts benefit and burden? Says whom?

02 Connect the work of growing as compassionate human beings and K-12 practitioners.

- How will (y)our racial equity efforts orchestrate us to grow as people (e.g. increased empathy and inclusivity) and as K-12 practitioners?
- How will racial equity efforts impact students of Color and their everyday classroom and schooling experience? How will we know?
- What classroom and/or pedagogical practices can we work towards developing? What is the role of critical scholarship and frameworks written by educational scholars of Color?
  - e.g. Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant teaching, Muhammad’s culturally and historically responsive literacy.

03 (Re)Consider who/what is hypervisible and invisible in racial equity work, and different needs and wants.

- Who and what is hypervisible and invisible in racial equity efforts?
- Whose needs and wants are being centered in racial equity efforts?
- What intersectional implications do race, and also ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical/emotional/developmental (dis)ability, age, economic status, and/or religious/spiritual affiliation have on (y)our equity work and learning?
  - intersectional: When different aspects of identity, such as race and gender, can operate together to advantage or disadvantage individuals and groups.
- How are we responsibly centering the students and communities who navigate and persevere through marginalization, and their needs and wants?
10 Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings

04  Prioritize counter-stories and local contexts with care and awareness.

* Counter-stories are the experiential knowledge of individuals of Color and their experiences with and responses to racism.
  - What opportunities are there to responsibly learn with and from counter-stories, and more local, lived, community experiences, first-hand histories, and leadership?
  - What are the impacts - personally and professionally - on both facilitators and practitioners of racial equity work, especially on people of Color? Says whom?
  - How and in what ways are counter-stories shared, received, and respected?
  - Who is explicitly and implicitly responsible (and accountable) for racial equity work in (your school or district)?
  - Who is leading and strategizing the work, and with what guiding information, perspectives, or assumptions?

05  Consider the more subtle, snowballing taxation on people of Color in racial equity work.

- What are the roles and expectations for people of Color in racial equity work in predominantly White settings and institutions? Says whom and for whom?
- Are people of Color being affirmed, validated, and appropriately compensated for all of their racial equity work (including more grassroots or less-visible work)?
- How and in what ways is racial equity work responsive to people of Color, their experiences, and the potential impact(s) of racialized trauma, racialization, isolation, and hostility, predominantly White racial environments?

06  Formalize racial equity commitments, funding, and professional learning & consider institutional power dynamics.

- Does (your school/district/state) have a formal commitment to or policy regarding racial equity?
  - If so, is the commitment operationalized and formally funded? Do staff receive ongoing opportunities for professional development and learning?
- How does institutional power and precedence, hierarchical structures, and/or school/district leadership impact racial equity work?
- How do policies or commitments change the functioning of systemic inequities?
- How do policies or commitments address on the ground needs and/or wants of students and communities of Color? How do we know?
- What is your school/district's strategic approach and/or guiding framework to racial equity work, and how was it determined?
10 Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings

07 Reconceptualize, diversify, and transparently share the data and tools that seek to measure the impacts of racial equity work.

- How and in what ways can racial equity work and its impact(s) be measured?
  - Says whom and for whom?
  - Is there a balance of qualitative (e.g., experiential) and quantitative (e.g., statistical) data?
  - How is “progress” being monitored or measured?
- How is feedback on racial equity work and the racial climate being responsibly and anonymously gathered? For and from whom?
  - What are the benefits and burdens of anonymous feedback?
  - How is the feedback reviewed, disaggregated, analyzed, shared, and acted upon?
- How can we build both trust and consistent opportunities to encourage students, staff, and community members of Color to be honest in sharing their experiences, and also to believe and expect that educators and schools will change as a result of it?

08 Be critically suspicious of “fresh coats of paint” over deeper structural issues.

- How can we prioritize identifying, dismantling, and rebuilding inequitable structures instead of just painting over them? How can we tell the difference between systemic and cosmetic issues?
- Given that we have finite time, energy, and other resources, what are the most important areas of focus in racial equity work? Says whom and for whom?
- How are current racial equity efforts similar to/different from those in the past year, five years, or decade? What are the short-term and long-term goals?
- What is the role and impact of institutional power and power-holders?

09 Ground (y)ourself and (y)our work in critical, local, and historical consciousness and legacies.

- How can the historical study of individuals and societies, and legacies of resistance and resilience, influence and guide (y)our racial equity efforts today?
- What are different types of resistance and resilience in regard to injustice, and what factors might contribute to how a person or group resists?
- How have people challenged oppression and racial injustice historically and contemporarily? How about specifically in (y)our city/county/state/region?
- What is the role of place-based education and contexts?

10 Build and sustain generative interracial coalitions and affinity spaces.

- What opportunities do educators have to learn and grow both together (e.g., interracial equity teams, learning commons) and apart (e.g., racial affinity spaces)?
- How are affinity spaces recognized, appreciated, and stewarded?
- How are groups formed, and what are the purposes and outcomes of work within the groups? Says whom and for whom?

For more context and information, please see: K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Predominantly White Pacific Northwest: Interracial Conversations, Counter-Stories, and Considerations (Parker, 2022), or email bradparker3@gmail.com
FOR MAJORITARIAN WHITE EDUCATORS:

7 Considerations and Provocations for K-12 Racial Equity Work in Predominantly White Settings

01 Cultivate and nurture a more critical humility.

02 Seek and develop critical interracial comradeship.

03 Set (y)our focus on whiteness, not just White people.

04 Engage within critical whiteness studies.

05 Embrace responsibility towards the untangling of racial legacies and advantages.

06 Ancestral reimagining and critical engagement with family history.

07 Disarm fear and insecurity & embrace egolessness.

Acknowledgement: Thank you to the brilliant project participants, and the scholarship - especially from critical scholars of Color - that inspired and helped me to co-construct these generative ideas, all of which are invitations for critical and compassionate inquiry and action, not solutions or to-do's. The following pages offer guiding questions for each consideration and provocation, with questions being categorized as intrapersonal, inter-personal, historical, and/or structural in an effort to transcend intrapersonal work and learning.
7 Considerations and Provocations
FOR MAJORITARIAN WHITE EDUCATORS

01 Cultivate and nurture a more critical humility.

Invitations for inquiry within this intra and interpersonal consideration include:
- How and in what ways am I expressing humble openness, self-awareness, self-reflection, supportive interactions, and sacrifice towards my own growth and actions in racial equity work?
- How am I working to understand what experiences mean to people different from me, especially experiences tied to sociopolitical & historical realities like injustice and racism?
- What additional experiences could I learn from to understand people different from me more holistically, and how can I responsibly engage within those experiences?

02 Seek and develop critical interracial comradeship.

Invitations for inquiry within this interpersonal consideration include:
- Considering that “It takes a village” (African proverb), who is in your “village” of seekers for more racial justice, and what is your relationship with those you work and learn with? What are the common aims that unite your “village?”
- What diverse perspectives and lived experiences are informing your individual and collective learning and efforts?
- How have you intentionally worked in solidarity with, shown reverence for, and expressed gratitude to comrades who are also members of the communities affected by the marginalization or oppression you are seeking to threaten and shift?

03 Set (y)our focus on whiteness, not just White people.

Invitations for inquiry within this structural consideration include:
- Are racial equity efforts targeting the operation of whiteness*?
  - * Whiteness (structural): beliefs and actions, uncritically positioned as the norm, that privilege White peoples’ experiences, perspectives, interests, or emotions.
- Or, are racial equity efforts targeting White people (individuals)? What’s the difference, how is it going, and how do you know?
- How can we actively and consciously betray the operation of whiteness in our work and being, and compassionately invite others to do the same?

04 Engage within critical whiteness studies

Invitations for inquiry within this intrapersonal and structural consideration include:
- What are the benefits and burdens of whiteness, and of studying and learning about whiteness? Says whom and for whom?
- How can a deeper understanding of critical whiteness studies* impact (y)our work towards more racial equity in education?
  - * This could include but not be limited to white racial identity, white racial innocence, white saviorism, white fragility, and white silence.
- How are the experiences and voices of people of Color present and central in all work seeking to betray whiteness?
7 Considerations and Provocations
FOR MAJORITARIAN WHITE EDUCATORS

05 Embrace responsibility towards the untangling of racial legacies and advantages.

Invitations for inquiry within this historical consideration include:
- What is your city/county/state/region’s racial history? What can we do with the histories and realities that we inherit?
- What has it meant throughout United States history to be White? What does it mean for you/us to be White?
- How can our efforts and learning, personally and professionally, work to right the wrongs of a historically and racially inequitable system of public education?
- Whose primary responsibility is it to change or repair inequitable structures and systems? Says whom and for whom?

06 Ancestral reimagining and critical engagement with family history.

Invitations for inquiry within this historical and intrapersonal consideration include:
- What is the role of power, race, and oppression in (your) own personal and ancestral histories? How can we use knowledge from our own histories to springboard equity and justice work today?
- How can we draw from our own ancestral lineage to (re)imagine the legacies we strive to leave?
- Could personal, ancestral, and critical learning be an intrapersonal prerequisite to engaging in more structural racial justice work and learning?
- Is it one’s individual responsibility to do such critical individual research and learning, or is it within the bounds of K-12 education?

07 Disarm fear and insecurity & embrace egolessness.

Invitations for inquiry within this intrapersonal consideration include:
- Are there topics or issues within racial equity work that spark personal fear or insecurity? How can we take inventory of our fears and strive to better understand them through nonjudgmental, growth-oriented, critical inquiry?
- Are there opportunities to have courageous dialogue with others about (your) fears and insecurities, both in homogeneous and heterogeneous settings?
- How can we practice and sustain compassionate inquisitiveness and adaptability when thinking about who we are and what we do?
- Can we be comfortable when there is no immediate “solution” or “to-do list” regarding racial equity work and learning?

For more context and information, please see: K-12 Racial Equity Work in the Predominantly White Pacific Northwest: Interracial Conversations, Counter-Stories, and Considerations (Parker, 2022), or email brad@parker3@gmail.com