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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

“JUST GO FOR THE LIE”: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY OF A WHITE FEMALE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Christie Michelle Toliver

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

December 2023

This Dissertation by: Christie Michelle Toliver

Entitled: *“Just Go for the Lie”: A Critical Autoethnographic Study of a White Female Elementary School Principal*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Program of Educational Leadership.

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ABSTRACT

Toliver, Christie Michelle. *“Just Go for the Lie”*: A Critical Autoethnographic Study of a White Female Elementary School Principal. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2023.

The purpose of this study was to analyze my own leadership experiences as a White cisgender female elementary school principal and how my white privilege contributed to maintaining white supremacy and systemic racism. The purpose was also to explore the impact of the evolution of my white racial frame and intentionally break my silence about white supremacy and systemic racism over the 2018–2019 school year. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical White Studies (CWS) provided the framework of analysis using a narrative structure to develop four critical vignettes at the micro level of education. Qualitative data were drawn from personal memory, documents, and vignettes. The method of analysis was critical autoethnography and analysis revealed elements related to the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and tokenism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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When traveling the road of dismantling and rebuilding my white racial frame, it was imperative that I humble myself as a mentee and embrace consistent mentorship throughout my journey. I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my mentors whose guidance and support played a pivotal role in completing this dissertation, and whose impact extends far beyond the pages of this document, shaping my approach to scholarship and research. Discernment, feedback, and encouragement gained through mentorship underscore the selfless dedication to fostering knowledge in others, something I hope to pay forward to future scholars. Cherish the mentors that show up in your life. They should be treasured like rare baseball cards.

It has taken me several years to complete this degree, a commitment I promised my parents I would fulfill. My Dad has since passed from prostate cancer, and my Mom is in her final stages of her battle with Alzheimer's, so I have to trust that they know I kept my promise. I know my Bonus Dad, Dave has been by my side the entire time. Thank you.

I would have given up long ago if it were not for my family and friends, who have been steadfast in their encouragement, grace, and laughter. The person who graciously served as a crucial thought partner in the role of Critical Friend is a very dear friend of many years, and our

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I also want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to our incredible son, Taye. Your joy, resilience, adaptability, and understanding of our family's sacrifices during this journey have left me in awe. Your steady support is a testament to your maturity and love. I am immensely proud of the young man you are becoming, and I am deeply grateful you are my son.

To both my husband and son, you have endured hundreds of hours of my absence and listened to me as I dismantled and rebuilt my understanding of our world, and you have done it with patience, humor, love, and kindness. Thank you for being here for me, motivating me, never quitting, and not letting me quit on myself. You are the reason I found my voice. You are the reason I finished this dissertation. The two of you inspire me daily to become a better person and make the world a better place. I dedicate this dissertation to the two of you. I love you the most! This family meeting has finally come to a close.

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CHAPTER I

THE LIE

During an administrative meeting in Fall of 2018, four tables were assembled to accommodate all the school administrators whose schools fed into one of our district high schools. Our purpose for each high school feeder group was to collaborate and design an elevator speech about the highlights of each feeder area that could be used as a marketing tool for an impending bond and budget election campaign for the Fall of 2019. Each feeder group had facilitators to move the conversation along as we focused on who we aspired to be in terms of our focus on our diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the district. As our group began to reflect, one of the leaders of our group paused the conversation to ask one of our facilitators a question. “Should we write an elevator speech about who we are, knowing this will not generate votes the following year? Or should we write our elevator speech from the perspective of who we aspire to be, even though we know we would be lying to our stakeholders?” Without much pause, our facilitator responded, “Just go for the lie.” I glanced at a colleague several seats down with a look that asked, “Are you serious?” I then made eye contact with a peer across the table and we held each other’s gaze with a shared understanding of suppressed anger. Finally, a colleague beside me quietly said, “I can’t do this.” I responded in agreement. With quiet resolve, we shared with the group that we could not engage in the exercise and sat quietly during the remainder of the meeting. I began to reflect on how I got here, to this place of “resistance.” This expectation of lying for marketing to our community was beginning to feel like emotional

manipulation to uphold the district's reputation and the role of white supremacy within the district.

Framing the Critical Autoethnography

White Supremacy

When I think of tokenism in the education system, I think of a White¹ cisgender woman who is brought into a patriarchal system, elevated into a position or role above, separate, or distinct from her colleagues because she is willing to comply with the rules. She might experience brief success, thinking it will foster permanent change. However, any success is only on the terms of the patriarchy, which uses the illusion of her success as an opportunity to project itself as equitable while sustaining white supremacy. In a 2018 episode of Malcom Gladwell's Revisionist History podcast, Gladwell focused on race and tokenism. Two poignant statements are made during the podcast: (a) You can only sell out if someone is buying, and (b) a token succeeds at the cost of her dignity (Gladwell, 2018). I knew I could no longer go for the lie and needed to find a way to break my silence about the existence of white supremacy within this school district. Pitcavage (2015) described the concept of white supremacy as follows:

White supremacy is an ideology whose earliest incarnations arose in the early 1800s as a reaction by white Southerners to the emerging abolitionist movement. Over time, it evolved into several forms, including religious ideologies, sometimes absorbing inspiration from abroad. However, generally speaking, white supremacists of whatever sort adhere to at least one of the following beliefs: 1) Whites should be dominant over people of other backgrounds; 2) by themselves in a Whites-only society; 3) White people

¹ Throughout this dissertation Black and White are capitalized when referring to people, not places or things.

have their own ‘culture’ that is superior to other cultures, and 4) White people are genetically superior to other people. (p. 3)

White supremacy refers to how the ruling class elite in the colonies of what became the United States used the socially constructed concept of race to create whiteness and a racialized hierarchy and political system to define who is seen as fully human and who is not (Okun, 2021). White supremacy works in collaboration with oppressions through a racialized hierarchy designed to divide and disconnect White people from racially minoritized people, divide and disconnect oppressed people from each other, divide and disconnect White people from each other, and divide us from ourselves. “White supremacy is a project of psychic conditioning and toxic belonging” (Okun, 2021, p. 3). It is still the driving force undergirding all systemic harm toward Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people across all aspects of our society, including policing, law, incarceration, food, housing, environment, immigration, health, and education (Okun, 2021). For example, although the United States spends over \$700 billion per year on public education, more than almost every other country, disparities in opportunities and outcomes remain, especially between White students and racially marginalized students (Hussar et al., 2020). Moreover, since our current educational system exists within our country's unjust realities, our education system continues to reflect the systemic injustices of society (Stephens et al., 2022).

**Problem Statement: White
Supremacy and the
Principalship**

“White supremacist ideology undergirds the policies, systems, and structures that sustain institutionalized racism in pre-K through postsecondary education” (Waite & Ehrich, 2022, p. 1769). An urgent need exists for school leaders to disrupt white supremacy in schools and a need for society to support school leaders and educators to address the realities and aspirations of

marginalized student groups (Shah et al., 2022). White supremacy persists partly because of the silence associated with racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Silence associated with an awareness of racism or a colorblind stance toward educational research, policy, and practice perpetuates superficial reform approaches that center whiteness instead of disrupting institutional racism to improve educational opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students (Kohli et al., 2017). Educators must disrupt school environments where silence and complicity toward injustice and inequities are rewarded until we successfully dismantle supremacy in U.S. schools (Waite & Ehrich, 2022). “If the legacy of white supremacy and racial discrimination were acknowledged, it might lead to the much-needed reckoning within the field of education” (Waite & Ehrich, 2022, p. 1764). I suggest systemic disruption requires personal reflection to understand the impact of white supremacy in education and recognize one's white privilege within a system rooted in white supremacy.

Toure and Dorsey (2018) argued that through their silence, the school leaders in their study left the dominant frame of white supremacy unchallenged, limiting teacher pedagogy and student learning opportunities. The authors affirmed that school leaders are vital in sustaining or disrupting practices that uphold racism. Because White principals substantially influence shaping educational opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students, I argue that they must reflect on how their white racial frame and white privilege impact their leadership. The current demographics of school leaders contrast greatly with student demographics. The most recent demographics of the 49.5 million students who enrolled in a public school in the United States for the 2021-2022 school year included students who identified as the following: 45% White, 28% Hispanic/Latine, 15% Black, 5% Asian, 5% Two+ Races, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and .04% Pacific Islander (NCES, 2022a). Eighty percent of teachers and

78% of principals identify as White (NCES, 2022b). However, in a study by Johnston and Young (2019), 40% of teachers and principals said their preservice programs did not prepare them for Black, Indigenous, and low-income students. White principals and teachers rated their preparation levels the lowest.

Once in the role of school leadership, any professional development focused on racism is very rare and minimally sustained (Toure & Dorsey, 2018). As early as 2003, it is estimated that companies were spending \$8 billion a year on diversity initiatives, but in the years since the 45th president was elected in 2016, the diversity industry has exploded (Hansen, 2003; Newkirk, 2019). However, rooted in compliance and struggling with racism, most diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are built on sand because of the unwillingness of organizations to analyze the impact of diversity programs they use because they would rather believe their initiatives work (Dover et al., 2020; Hansen, 2003). This unwillingness is particularly true in organizations where DEI activities serve as window dressing while having zero impact on truly redistributing power equitably (Hansen, 2003; Ray, 2019). DEI initiatives do not work because they do not give people the necessary skills to recognize and disrupt racial inequities. They do not lead to long-term human behavior changes because organizations do not create metrics to hold people accountable (Hansen, 2003). Many school districts have added a chief equity officer or similarly titled position to foster accountability and show a commitment to addressing the inequities facing Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students (Lewis et al., 2023). However, it is imperative to consider that you cannot gain the high level of DEI training and education needed if the organization's resources and enthusiasm are not present and those charged with leading these initiatives are insufficient and limited (Boykin et al., 2020). I argue that school leaders cannot rely on superficial equity initiatives to inform their growth as anti-racist school

leaders. "A superficial response to changing demographics in public schools, additive frames of diversity that maintain whiteness as central often serve as substitutes for concrete discussions of race or racism, thus maintaining or exacerbating racial inequity in schools" (Kohli et al., 2017, p.187). Feagin (2013) argued that only individuals who engage in sustained self-reflection about their White racial frame would be better prepared to disrupt white supremacy. Therefore, to effectively lead educators toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race and "develop the political will to breach the contractual expectations of white supremacy" (Shah et al., 2022, p. 461; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011).

To engage in emotional and intellectual work around race, it is imperative to develop a white racial identity through a systemic lens because white supremacy is consistently fostered by White elites through a white racial frame deeply institutionalized at all levels of society (Feagin, 2013). I argue that developing one's white racial framing is a robust way to develop white racial identity because Feagin's (2013) theory of systemic racism includes the idea that explicit racial inequality and oppression are written directly into the U.S. Constitution. Racial inequality still exists in society today due to the history of enslaved Black labor and stripping land from Indigenous people to divert these assets to White people (Byng, 2013). Our country's history and current systemic racism are informed and interpreted through a white racial frame that validates and perpetuates systemic racism (Byng, 2013; Feagin, 2013). Social movements and anti-racist efforts across racial lines are imperative to challenging racism (Byng, 2013; Feagin, 2013). "Racism is about the meanings of racialized identities" (Byng, 2013, p. 709). More of the back story of racial inequality needs to be told (Byng, 2013). Through the lens of a white racial frame "we need to connect racial inequality and differences between racial groups to policy agendas,

public discourses, and how people interpret and experience racial identities” with macro, micro and meso level data informing research that illuminates racial differences and demonstrates the maintenance of white supremacy in U.S. society (Byng, 2013, p. 713; Feagin, 2013).

Cultural Context for This Study

I contend that when White women in educational leadership do engage in White racial identity development and do develop the political will to disrupt white supremacy yet do not present as compliant, submissive, and silent but instead present as vocal equity-minded school leaders, their marginalized perspective can contribute to their career demise. Approximately 12 years ago, I was a young mom and school administrator embarking on my first principalship in the district I had served following over a decade of service as both a classroom teacher and assistant principal. I was living in the world as a White cisgender female, oblivious of the racial harm I was causing students and colleagues in my leadership role. Life experience can be a motivating factor to seek more knowledge. Critical experiences as a parent and school administrator led me to engage in personal learning experiences to understand white supremacy in education better. Through learning about systemic racism, what was once invisible to me became unavoidable. As I continued to acquire knowledge, I changed as a person, a wife, a mother, and a school leader. I began to use my voice to speak up against oppressive practices at the school, community, and district levels, warning my executive director that I anticipated pushback in my school community. As I changed as a person and a leader, I found myself in a similar predicament I had placed others both consciously and unconsciously. As predicted, I became the target of the school community, my staff, and my direct report resulting in my demotion and removal from the leadership position of an elementary school principal. Swanson and Welton (2019) stated, “Existing research...does not fully capture the political challenges and

possible stakeholder pushback that White principals may be up against when confronting whiteness in their school communities” (p. 734). The authors argued that White principals would face pushback when attempting to disrupt a system that privileges them and that more research should be conducted to illustrate “a more authentic representation of the internal struggle with whiteness that a White principal would most likely face when practicing anti-racist leadership” (p. 734). Irby et al. (2019) further alerted White school leaders that “should they undertake leadership for racial equity, their white professional and personal lives may get a little worse before they get better, if at all” (p. 207).

Purpose Statement

This critical autoethnography analyzed my own leadership experiences as a White cisgender female elementary school principal and how my white privilege contributed to maintaining white supremacy and systemic racism. The purpose was also to explore the impact of the evolution of my white racial frame and intentionally break my silence about white supremacy and systemic racism over the 2018–2019 school year.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- Q1 How did my white privilege foster whiteness and contribute to white supremacy and systemic racism?
- Q2 How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?

Overview of the Methodology

The methodology of critical autoethnography used in this study is a form of research and writing through which a researcher analyzes personal experiences while using critical theory as the analysis framework to investigate social phenomena and understand cultural experiences

(Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Ellis et al., 2011). Critical autoethnography is a powerful methodology that can be used to disrupt the dominance of one group over another and instead represent voices unheard or actively silenced (Allen-Collinson, 2013).

Data Collection

Data collection was generated through the written production of critical essays, informed by personal memory and documents, which was organized using a narrative structure. Inserting these critical essays into a narrative structure allowed for a meaningful progression through the data analysis process. Once the selected essays were grouped into a narrative structure and developed through the process of composing the critical autoethnography, the data for this study was analyzed through the theoretical perspectives of critical race theory (CRT) and critical white studies (CWS). To contribute to this research project's trustworthiness and challenge any preconceived notions I may have had, I partnered with a critical friend as part of the data analysis process. Engaging in a critical friend protocol was a crucial tool to deepen my understanding of my data and informed analytical techniques that contributed to my ability to answer my research questions authentically (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Conclusion

This chapter began with a critical essay to illustrate an example of lies educators are asked to endorse to uphold white supremacy, followed by a brief discussion around the implications of white supremacy and the implications white supremacy and the principalship. "Whiteness is at every level of curricula, pedagogy, instructional, and leadership practices" (Genao & Mercedes, 2021, p. 135). An urgent need exists for school leaders to break their silence to address the realities and aspirations of marginalized student groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) and disrupt the white supremacist ideology that still undergirds the system of education

(Shah et al., 2022; Waite & Ehrich, 2022). “The current socio-political climate has not demonstrated that this type of change can happen without White people for efficiency purposes. We need to be effective” (Genao & Mercedes, 2021, p. 135). Next, I outlined the study's cultural context and briefly explained the problem statement, research questions, methodology, and data collection.

My purpose statement and research questions advanced our understanding of White female school leaders, specifically concerning white privilege, white racial identity development, whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic racism. In addition, my findings contributed to the deficiency in qualitative research using critical autoethnographic methods that apply the combination of CRT and CWS for White female leaders to interrogate their contribution to sustaining or dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism in education.

I want to call back the significance of the expectation of lying to uphold the reputation of a school district and the white supremacy sustained within a district. “Are we unaware that anything exists beyond the light provided by a system designed to maintain itself?” (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 5). For my White racial identity growth, I relied solely on district professional development during my 7 years as a classroom teacher and the first 10 years as an elementary school administrator. It did not cross my mind to look beyond my organization because I didn't think to question those in leadership positions above me. I contend that relying only on district DEI initiatives left me completely insufficient and limited to addressing the dehumanization and humiliation I knew to be happening to Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine students and staff members. I knew harm was happening. I was a part of that harm. However, I was unaware of the depths the system would go to exercise its power to sustain white supremacy. “Whiteness will counterpunch and try to knock you out because whiteness is consumed by its

own self interest” (Genao & Mercedes, 2021, p. 135). Whiteness is consumed with its own lie. This need to justify a false identity has left society in the hands of the world's most powerful and ignorant people because they decided they were White, opting for safety instead of choosing life (Baldwin, 1984).

This study shed light on the unlearning and undoing of leadership approaches saturated in whiteness, patriarchy, compliance, denial, ignorance, and silence that harm Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students, staff, and community members (Shah et al., 2022). Analyzing and unlearning the lies I believed and contributed to felt terrifying. Yet, I felt a personal mandate to expose myself, the harm I caused, the harm I witnessed, and the system that eventually silenced me. Although James Baldwin articulated the following statement over 64 years ago, the urgency remains:

What the times demand...is...that one be thoroughly disciplined...that one resist at whatever cost the fearful pressures placed on one to lie about one's own experience. For the same way that the writer scarcely had a more uneasy time, he has never been needed more (Gold, 1959, p. 19).

No lie can live forever.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial inequalities in U.S. schools are “a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47). Despite a rich body of CRT scholarship, white supremacy continues to undergird the field of education (Waite & Ehrich, 2022). White supremacy is an oppressive system infused with unmerited privilege at the expense of the suffering of people who are not White (Jensen, 2005). Leonardo (2013) reminded us that “White supremacy is an entire political system” (p. 94). Within the field of education, white supremacy often “goes undetected, despite the major implications it imposes on the educational equity of students of color” (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 35). White supremacy persists partly because of the silence associated with racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). We have not succeeded in dismantling white supremacy in U.S. schools.

Although a large scope of research has focused on the roles expected of teachers and school administrators, little consideration has been given regarding how white supremacist ideology has contributed to inequities in the field of education, with little interruption to the “pathology of racism that plagues the field of education, broadly, and educational leadership” (Waite & Ehrich, 2022, p. 1759). Waite and Ehrich (2022) argued that building administrators significantly impact school culture and climate. It is imperative to recognize that hegemony, white supremacy, and racism continue to infiltrate U.S. school buildings, impacting student achievement. National standards in educational leadership do not require administrators in

education to explore how the legacy of slavery, racism, and anti-Blackness contribute to present-day challenges in schools. School leaders' lack of knowledge limits their abilities to interrogate systemic racism and support the students and communities they serve (Waite & Ehrich, 2022).

Although the existing body of qualitative research includes studies using various methodologies focused on White teachers and school leaders related to white supremacy and systemic racism, the deficiency in research lies within the methodology of critical autoethnographic research. Few critical autoethnographic studies exist that demonstrate White female school leaders engaged in critical reflection on their white privilege in school leadership. It is difficult to find critical autoethnographic studies that illustrate White female school leaders using the combination of CRT and CWS to interrogate their contribution to either sustaining or dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism in education.

The purpose of this critical autoethnography was to analyze the leadership experiences I faced as a White cisgender female elementary school principal and how my white privilege contributed to the maintenance of white supremacy and systemic racism. In addition, the purpose was to also explore the impact of the evolution of my white racial frame and intentionally break my silence about white supremacy and systemic racism over the 2018–2019 school year. The following research questions guided the study:

- Q1 How did my white privilege foster whiteness and contribute to white supremacy and systemic racism?
- Q2 How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?

We must look through a critical lens as we examine ways to dismantle white supremacy in education. For this research, intersecting theoretical ideas from CRT and CWS were used through the methodology of critical autoethnography to strengthen my understanding of what happened when I—as a White cisgender female elementary school principal, who was once

complicit to racism in my leadership—chose to be no longer silent and started questioning systems of oppression, making me a target of the same harm I once caused others. My study was informed by tenets of CRT and CWS acting as a belief system guiding each stage of this study.

This literature review is divided into two sections to provide a theoretical frame of reference for CRT and CWS. The first section will explore the following elements of CRT: (a) definition; (b) history; (c) key tenets; (d) applications of CRT; (e) applications of CRT in education; and (f) applications to this study. The second section will cover the following components of CWS: (a) definition; (b) history; (c) evolution of CWS; (d) applications of CWS in education; and (e) applications to this study.

CRT is a useful tool for a critical autoethnographic study because the theory provides a framework to push “toward understanding how our personal epistemologies directly influence our professional praxis” (Waite & Ehrich, 2022, p. 1766). CRT provides a lens to interrogate educators’ roles in sustaining or disrupting white supremacy and racism in school settings in the United States (Waite & Ehrich, 2022). A critical autoethnographic study that draws on CRT can help shed light on the experiences and perspectives of individuals concerning issues of race, racism, and other forms of oppression. CRT can also provide insight into understanding the relationship between one’s personal experiences and larger social structures and systems of power to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives (Castagno, 2014). This study used CRT to examine how race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression and power, requiring me to critically analyze and understand how my white privilege fostered whiteness and contributed to white supremacy and systemic racism in a school setting.

With its roots in CRT, CWS is also a valuable theory for a critical autoethnographic study because it provides a framework for examining one’s own experiences and perspectives as a

White person within the larger context of white privilege, whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic oppression (Castagno, 2014). “Centering whiteness as an analytical tool facilitates analysis of racial power working with, through, and against other axes of dominance” (Castagno, 2014, p. 6). By examining how white identity and privilege are constructed and maintained, a critical autoethnographic study that draws on critical whiteness studies can help shed light on the experiences and perspectives of White individuals related to race and racism. Specific to this critical autoethnographic study, CWS was a helpful framework to investigate how my white racial frame evolved and how those changes impacted my leadership practice as a White cisgender female school administrator.

While reviewing literature focused on studies dedicated to the racial consciousness of school leaders, I often found studies focused on White teachers rather than White school administrators. These studies often used CRT or CWS and only occasionally combined CRT tenets with CWS concepts. Critical autoethnographic studies focused on the racial consciousness of White school administrators using a combination of CRT with CWS are only sparingly represented within the literature reviewed for this study. Combining CRT and CWS through a critical autoethnographic study did, in a subtle but essential way, contribute to critical literature focused on the racial consciousness of White women in educational leadership positions.

Critical Race Theory

Definition of Critical Race Theory

Because this study focused on white privilege, white supremacy, and systemic racism, using CRT is imperative to the type of interrogation work I needed to do as the sole subject of this research study. CRT is an analytical framework from legal studies that endeavors to examine U.S. law as it intersects with issues of race (Matsuda, 1991b). Studies of CRT have the end goal

of combatting racism as institutionalized by and in law (Bell, 1995b; Crenshaw et al., 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Solórzano (1997) defined CRT as “a framework, or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy, that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural or cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of people of color” (p. 6). Likewise, Matsuda (1991b) viewed CRT as the work of legal scholars of color who attempt to develop a legal theory that exposes the role of racism in American law and who work toward its eradication. CRT was developed by “existentially people of color” who were engaged in the fight against racism (Bell, 1995b, p. 898). Critical race theorists who were White were devoted to dismantling their own white privilege.

History of Critical Race Theory

CRT emerged in the mid-1970s out of critical legal studies formed by Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman in response to the slow pace of racial reform after the civil rights movement in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). The gains of the civil rights movement were curtailed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Civil rights attorneys and scholars across the United States understood that new approaches and theories were needed to confront institutionalized or covert racism in a climate where the American people were weary of hearing about race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and other theorists convened at the first CRT workshop in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1989. The CRT movement began with a focus on “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). CRT was also influenced by the radical feminism formed by Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson. CRT also derived ideas from European theorists

and philosophers, including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Antonio Gramsci. Figures of the radical American tradition, such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, César Chavez, and Martin Luther King, further informed the development of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Willis, 2014).

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

CRT includes several tenets, but not all scholars agree with each tenet presented (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Matsuda et al., 1993). For example, Matsuda et al. (1993) described six tenets to their CRT framework, including: (a) CRT asserts that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life; (b) CRT challenges legal claims of race neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and the myth of meritocracy; (c) CRT presumes that the history of racism has contributed to all current disparities (e.g., income, education, health) between racial groups; (d) CRT insists on relying on the voices and knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society; (e) CRT should be interdisciplinary across all scholarly domains; and (f) CRT aspires to eliminate racial oppression as part of the broader focus toward ending all forms of inequity. More recently, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have focused on three specific tenets of CRT, namely: (a) CRT argues that racism is normal and not easily cured because it is not acknowledged; (b) CRT asserts that the interests of both White people and people of color must converge if there is to be racial progress; and (c) CRT holds that race is socially constructed and has no biological or genetic basis.

As CRT developed, scholars realized that race was impacted by other social forces as the product of a heteropatriarchy (Valdes et al., 2002). The idea that aspects of identity such as race and gender did not operate in isolation but were interconnected was a newer concept (Chang & Culp, 2002). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was critical of the notion of identity as a single-axis

framework practiced in legal doctrine and antiracist and feminist politics. Crenshaw (1989) centered Black women in legal analysis to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorted these lived experiences. Crenshaw (1991) used the term intersectionality as a CRT tenet "to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (p. 1244). CRT scholars broadened the term and framed intersectionality as "the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58). Individual members of society represent multiple identities and perform those identities in a variety of ways, never knowing for sure to which of these identities others react (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

CRT scholars want to understand how white supremacy and the systemic and personal oppression of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people are constructed and sustained in America. Their mission demands a deep understanding of the origins of legal discourse to develop criticisms of those legal ideals (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). CRT has branched into Asian, Hispanic/Latine, LGBTQ+, Muslim, and Indigenous groups, generating their own body of literature based on each group's priorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT will continue to evolve and reinvent itself to meet the needs of the communities served (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Applications of Critical Race Theory

In the 1970s and 1980s, CRT was applied within the field of law to assess hate speech, hate crimes, and affirmative action. In the 1990s, scholars began to apply CRT's tenets to the education field. Most recently, in the early 21st century, CRT has been used to evaluate police

brutality, criminal justice, poverty, the welfare state, health care, immigration, and voting rights (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007).

CRT maintains the following five criticisms of traditional legal discourse and thinking:

(a) CRT asserts that the appearance of neutrality in the law cloaks the fact that the perspective of the White majority is the foundation of traditional legal discourse (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005); (b) traditional legal thinking about racism and racial oppression is from the viewpoint of the perpetrator, not the victim (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Freeman, 1978); (c) The Supreme Court only considers consciously racially motivated acts of discrimination and overlooks the impact of unconscious forms of racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Lawrence, 1987); (d) CRT maintains that traditional legal discourse is inadequate because it lacks the perspective of the interest convergence principle that posits that Black people only make gains against racial oppression when their interests converge with those of White elites (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005); (5) CRT holds that out of the interest convergence principle of Derrick Bell (1980) comes Bell's racial realism concept that states racism is indestructible and will always be an imperative and permanent fixture of American society (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Because it is imperative to examine ways to dismantle white supremacy through a critical lens, it is helpful to investigate how CRT was first used in law before exploring its application in education. First, understanding the origins and application of CRT in law makes the use and application of CRT in other fields more recognizable and more easily transferable to other fields of research. The following section will illustrate how CRT was first applied toward affirmative action in the field of law prior to transitioning to the use of CRT in education.

Critical Race Theory and Affirmative Action

Using the concept of affirmative action helps explore how the CRT framework is a valuable tool for legal analysis to confront colorblind ideology and move toward a deeper understanding of racial realism and racial permanence to dismantle systems of oppression in the field of law (Bell, 1992; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Literature on hate speech, hate crimes, and the First Amendment brought CRT scholars to other political and intellectual intersections, including the debate over affirmative action (Matsuda et al., 1993). Affirmative action was conceived in the 1960s as a compromise to the demands of women and people of color who experienced discrimination and racial bias in the hiring process (Crenshaw et al., 2018). Affirmative action programs became a legal remedy in Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Mullen (1988) defined affirmative action as:

Attempts to make progress toward substantive, rather than merely formal, equality of opportunity for those groups, such as women or racial minorities, who are currently underrepresented in significant positions in society, by explicitly taking into account the defining characteristics—sex or race—which have been the basis for discrimination. (p. 244)

Soon after the Civil Rights Act was made effective, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Order No. 11246, which clarified that organizations could not discriminate in employment and must act aggressively and affirmatively to remove all barriers to women and people of color (Exec. Order No. 11246, 1964–1965; Nan, 1994). To enforce the Civil Rights Act, Congress passed the Equal Employment Act of 1972, which gave the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission the power to perform investigations, begin legal proceedings when there was considerable evidence of discrimination, and order affirmative action programs (Equal

Employment Opportunity Act, 1972; Nan, 1994). Following the Civil Rights Act, White people seemed to agree with affirmative action in the workplace and higher education. However, by the late 1980s, job competition increased, and backlash resurfaced as White people did not want to relinquish their privileged status (Nan, 1994). An increase in the backlash against affirmative action programs emerged with legal fights aimed at the meager gains attained by women, Black people, and other oppressed groups (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a). American citizens largely believed equality had been established and felt marginalized groups were making gains at the cost of the privileged (Nan, 1994; Shteynberg et al., 2011).

When analyzed through the lens of CRT, affirmative action programs appear to be no more than window dressing (Amsden & Moser, 1975). Some CRT scholars have criticized affirmative action for its glacial pace of progress and ineffectiveness in achieving racially balanced and bias-free institutions (Nan, 1994). This glacial pace and ineffectiveness demonstrate Derrick Bell's interest convergence principle and illustrate his stance on the permanence of racism in American society (Bell, 1980, 1992). Bell (2000) offered two rules to explain the continued cycle of racial gains and losses: (a) society will always sacrifice the rights of Black people in order to protect the political or economic interests of White people; and (b) society will only recognize the rights of Black people and other oppressed groups when and only if the recognition benefits the political or economic interests of White people.

However, according to Bell (1979), affirmative action programs and similar measures only slightly increased the number of individuals from oppressed groups who accessed higher-level professions and primarily benefited White people, while Black people paid a substantial cost for the same benefit. Bell (1979) further explained that this cost stems from the perception White people held that educational opportunities were limited and became threatened by

affirmative action programs. The author stated that this perception gained more power from the belief of White people that Black people should never get ahead of White people. Advancements for Black people demanded major sacrifice and effort to change policies that oppressed Black people and some White people. Although Black people will have fought for equitable policy change, White people were ultimately the primary beneficiaries of those policy changes (Bell, 1979). Bell (1988) argued that even with affirmative action programs in response to the lack of Black employees, only a few Black candidates were selected for positions previously occupied by only White candidates. For example, once White faculties hire one or two candidates of color in academia, the pressure is off for further affirmative action, citing the perceived lack of qualified Black candidates (Bell, 1979).

Affirmative action has, at times, been seen as a policy that discriminates against White people and has therefore been the subject of criticism and scrutiny. In the U.S. Supreme Court case the *University of California Regents v. Bakke* (1978), a White male twice applied for admission to the Medical School of the University of California at Davis and was denied both times. The U.S. Supreme Court held that quota systems that favor people of color and women discriminate against White men based on race and sex (Nan, 1994; *University of California Regents v. Bakke*, 1978). The Court ruled that quota systems violated equal protection but that race could play a role in admissions criteria as long as it was among several other criteria considered for admission. Six more cases followed and collectively showed the Court's desire to limit affirmative action. Rooted in a colorblind interpretation of the Constitution, the Court stated affirmative action should not be used to correct broad societal discrimination (Nan, 1994). More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court heard both *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* (2022) and *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*

(2022). The Court consisting of six conservative members struck down the form of race-conscious admissions they have been using on June 29, 2023, which Cantu (2023) argued does not bode well for advocates of affirmative action.

Colorblind ideology surfaced in the 1960s as a mechanism to defend the contemporary racial order in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Colorblindness is defined as “dysconscious racism” because it sustains the culture of power (Choi, 2008; King, 1991). To describe the act of colorblindness, Gordon (2005) wrote, “Colorblindness is a bid for innocence, an attempt to escape our responsibility for our White privilege. By claiming innocence, we reconcile ourselves to racial irresponsibility” (p. 143). Further, colorblindness advocates race neutrality in policy and practice and interpretation of the law (Bell, 1992; Matsuda et al., 1993; Nan, 1994).

The *University of California Regents v. Bakke* (1978) case is an example of how colorblind ideology can influence the interpretation of the law. In *University of California Regents v. Bakke* (1978), Bell (1992) stated that the Court relied heavily on the formal language of the 14th Amendment, ignored social questions about the impact of race in academia, ignored historical patterns and current statistics, and did not apply flexible reasoning. Bell suggested that had the Court applied the concept of racial realism to the case, it may have decided *University of California Regents v. Bakke* (1978) differently. For example, the Court may have considered the social landscape, noting the lack of diversity of medical students, and could have reflected on the societal and social factors that led to the underrepresentation of some racial groups in the student demographics. Instead, the Court’s analysis of *University of California Regents v. Bakke* (1978) lacked attention to contextual factors related to affirmative action and offered only a colorblind analysis of the law (Bell, 1992; Matsuda et al., 1993; Nan, 1994).

CRT scholars understand that the protection of White people's race-based privilege is a theme perpetuated in civil rights decisions (Bell, 1992). Using the CRT framework as a tool of legal analysis to explore the concept of affirmative action served to illuminate the permanence of racism in society, illustrated the concept of racial realism, and attested to the limits of colorblind ideology (Bell, 1992; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Matsuda et al., 1993). These systems and structures of oppression exist beyond legal discourse, and CRT has been a vital instrument for examining systemic racism in society. In the 1990s, scholars expanded beyond legal analysis and began to apply CRT's tenets to education, and that examination continues presently.

Critical Race Theory and Education

Although CRT was created as an analytical framework from legal studies that endeavored to critically examine U.S. law as it intersected with issues of race, the framework has expanded beyond its use in legal studies to other fields. Disciplines such as American studies, women's and gender studies, sociology, and education have used the framework to focus in particular on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and funding (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

This section of the literature review seeks to investigate the application of CRT in education, yet it is essential to consider critical historical and social movements within the field. In 1954, The U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark decision that ordered the desegregation of public schools throughout the United States in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Despite this decision, school districts in southern states sought exemption from the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) mandate, stating that desegregation was logistically impossible due to de facto residential segregation (Liu, 2004). The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) Court decision ruled that the local school districts were responsible for determining the pace and

structure of the desegregation effort “with all deliberate speed,” with the lower courts monitoring progress (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1955). Bell (1980) argued that the precepts of freedom and equality heralded during World War II in support of members of developing countries had no meaning in the United States. After fighting on behalf of the United States against oppressed people in other countries, Black veterans returned home only to face continued racial discrimination and violent attacks. Almost a decade later, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) finally offered Black Americans hope that freedom and equality would be valued and would encourage Americans to visualize a country moving from a plantation system toward a more industrialized nation (Bell, 1980, 2004).

While the desegregation of schools in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision appeared to acknowledge and address the immorality of racial equality in education, through the lens of CRT, the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision was viewed as systemic racism within the judicial system created to meet the self-interest of White people more than it was meant to advance Black people (Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This distraction demonstrates Derrick Bell’s interest convergence principle and illustrates his stance on the permanence of racism in American society (Bell, 1980, 1992). The challenge of converging interests is that White people may worry about how policy or system changes might threaten their status, position, or property, and they struggle with sharing benefits and privileges they have enjoyed exclusively that could transform the system to be advantageous for all people (Bell, 1980). Change is often purposefully or even subconsciously slow, at the will of White people who historically change policies or practices as they deem necessary to maintain their power or status quo (Milner et al., 2013). To recognize the permanence of racism in education, understanding interest convergence is critical.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) preceded further activism in education, which led to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Following the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) school desegregation efforts of the 1960s and 1970s eventually contributed to new development in education to teach diverse students with more intentionality to embrace each student's culture (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). However, the U.S. education system has sustained a hierarchy that upholds the values of the mainstream culture through a lack of diversity in the staff, unequal distribution of resources, and underrepresentation of students of color in the curriculum (Delpit, 1995; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2021). These deficits reflect that racism exists at the institutional level down to the personal level of society, particularly within education and in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Moreover, these deficits mean that systemic racism influences the field of education at the macro, meso, and micro levels of society (Byng, 2013).

The literature review sections below will illustrate the application of CRT within the field of education by looking at the role of racism at three social levels: macro, meso, and micro (Byng, 2013). The macro level of society includes the interaction of racism at the federal and state levels. In education, the macro level of society includes the interaction of racism with federal and state education law and policy development related to perspectives on society and culture. The meso level of society focuses on morality and legitimacy. It is the domain of public discourse, and the media is used to create public knowledge and common sense influences on the social construction of race. Meso-level structures provide society with everyday experiences through organizations, social networks, public agencies, corporate businesses, news broadcasts, school policies and practices, curricula, and standardized exams (Byng, 2013; Martin, 2012). Within the field of education, Bruhn and Rebach (2007) illustrated the following:

Meso-level structures have in common that they provide people with their everyday experiences. Meso-level structures include a variety of organizations and social networks such as neighborhoods, neighborhood institutions, gangs, clubs, public agencies, corporate businesses, boards, and even Internet chat rooms. They provide everyday roles that often become intricately linked with our identities and meet various needs beyond those met by family. For example, a public school system within an identified district, a school within that system, and Mr. Brown's third-grade class could all be characterized as meso-level structures. The school and the class are subject to influences and constraints from the macro levels, the larger society, the state, the state's educational setup, and the school district itself. As meso-level structures, the school and the class affect each child—micro level—in Mr. Brown's class. (p. 116)

CRT scholars assert that morality and legitimacy are situated within the meso level (Bruhn & Rebach, 2007; Byng, 2013). By combining images and indirect content through discursive practices or modes of framing rooted in both fact and fiction, it is the meso level of society that determines how racial meanings are enacted at the macro and micro levels, further holding racism in place (Byng, 2013). Content based in fact and fiction converge to “create ways of knowing,” and the meso level legitimates how the meaning of race is enacted at the macro and micro levels (Byng, 2013, p. 710).

The meso level can be seen as the intermediate level of analysis that acts as a bridge between the macro and micro levels of the macro-micro continuum (Byng, 2013; Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). The micro level of this continuum is situated opposite the macro level and is concerned with small groups or individuals in society (Byng, 2013). The micro level is subject to the constraints and influences from the macro and meso levels of society while serving as a tool

to examine identity negotiations and the lived experiences of individuals or small groups. For example, in education, the micro level explores the definitions of race identities, what happens to small groups or individuals, and how they interpret their lived experiences in school or classroom settings (Byng, 2013). Racism is the convergence of meanings from all three levels and the recursive exchange of meanings across all social levels.

Education at the Macro-Level

During the 1990s, race scholars in education employed critical race legal arguments to highlight racial inequities in schools and to disrupt institutionalized racism in education (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Kohli et al., 2017). For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate were researching the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision and the unyielding impact of race on education when they were presented with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1988) article, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law" (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Crenshaw (1988) argued that critical scholars, as well as neoconservatives, minimized the profound impact of racism on life in the United States. Both critical scholars and neoconservatives claimed instead that we had reached the point of colorblindness in society. Crenshaw (1988) further asserted that CRT exposes the fallacy that societal norms are neutral and that this lack of neutrality must be confronted to achieve full equality assured in the Constitution at the macro level.

As Ladson-Billings and Tate continued to read other CRT scholars, they realized that the analytical framework of CRT used in legal studies offered a robust theoretical understanding of race, addressed a range of issues, and could be applicable to examine the same colorblind ideology that perpetuates racial inequality in the field of education at the macro level (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) theorized that since the U.S. school system was

meant to prepare its citizens to be contributors to society, CRT would be a valuable tool to examine the intersection of race and citizenship in education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) promoted using CRT in education because it required schools to internally reflect on how their structures and processes sustained ethnic, gender, and racial subordination (Solórzano et al., 2000).

In the seminal article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) added to the CRT paradigm the idea that democracy in the macro-level context of the United States was built on capitalism and that society was based on property rights, not human rights. Using the analytical framework of CRT, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) illustrated how to expose social and school inequities in education by focusing on three propositions:

(a) race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the U.S.; (b) U.S. society is based on property rights; and (c) the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, educational) inequity. (p. 48)

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) claimed that race was undertheorized and class and gender studies alone failed to expose the complete picture of inequality in education. As to the first proposition that race is so deeply ingrained in U.S. society, Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that it is not poverty alone, but the intersection of poverty with the condition of schools and schooling that contributes to the formation of the institutional racism which negatively impacts the performance of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students. The second proposition discussed by Ladson-Billings and Tate was in response to the civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s who had fought for social justice by appealing to civil and human rights even though

U.S. society was based on property rights. In its simplest form, those citizens with better property were entitled to better schools. The more complex example was that the aftermath of the ambiguous civil rights judicial decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to desegregate schools caused White flight and left Black teachers and administrators without employment when schools eventually closed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

To illustrate the third proposition focused on the intersection of race and property in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) used Cheryl Harris' (1993) analysis of whiteness as property. Harris termed the "property functions of whiteness" as follows: (a) rights of disposition; (b) rights to use and enjoyment; (c) reputation and status property; and (d) the absolute right to exclude. The rights of disposition concept suggests that whiteness is a right only White people can have, but because property rights are considered alienable or transferable, whiteness can be conferred (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In a school setting, students are only rewarded when they conform to white norms in their dress, speech, and concepts of knowledge (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The notion of the rights to use and enjoyment suggests that whiteness allows for certain cultural, social, and economic privileges (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In a school setting, this can be interpreted as the difference between those students who possess the right to access what the school can offer—both in the environment and in the structure of the curriculum—versus those students who do not, due to an inability to access the benefits of whiteness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). White students can enjoy the privilege of whiteness socially, culturally, and economically in society and within school settings' systems, structures, and curricula (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The concept of the right to reputation and status as property is often demonstrated in legal cases of slander or libel. To damage someone's reputation equals damaging some aspect of his or her personal property (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Related to race, to call a White person by another racial term could be considered an act of defamation.

The belief in the right to exclude is rooted in the ideology that whiteness is a socially constructed concept that speaks to the absence of the contamination of Blackness, including the idea of the "one-drop of black blood rule" (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994). In a school setting, exclusion was first demonstrated by completely refusing Black people access to education. Over time, this practice evolved in the form of segregated schools, then following desegregation, existing tracking systems were repurposed or were more intentional to track gifted programs, honors programs, and advanced placement classes to make them more accessible to White students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The pioneering work of Ladson-Billings and Tate demonstrates how CRT can be used to examine the interaction of racism in education through a macro-level lens.

Education at the Meso-Level

School or district policy and practices are situated within the meso-level structures of society and can embody the white supremacist and white racial identity ideologies of macro-level forces to sustain racism in an educational setting (Byng, 2013; Gillborn, 2013). CRT scholars focused on understanding education policy (Gillborn, 2013). Stephen Ball broadly defined education policy to include pieces of national or international legislation—down to informal institutional practices he called "little-p policies"—enacted in local institutions (Ball, 2008, p. 7; Gillborn, 2013). Ball (2008) argued that policy should not be viewed as an object or outcome but as an ongoing, uncertain, and ever-changing process with meanings that do not

always smoothly translate into institutional practices. Gillborn (2013) argued that passing legislation is a tiny part of the impact education policy has on the daily experiences of racially marginalized students and families. A traditional policy analyst presumes that neutral and systemic evidence collection informs policy formation, while a critical race theorist recognizes the importance of a race-conscious approach to policy analysis (Buras, 2013). David Gillborn (2013) defined a CRT analysis of education policy as follows:

A perspective that radically challenges the taken-for-granted traditional view of policy as an incremental process moving toward greater justice and inclusion. CRT reveals policy as a central tool in the continuing struggles for racial justice against a regime of white supremacy. (p. 129–130)

The following meso-level educational policy study conducted by Anyon et al. (2018) of the Denver Public School District sought to explore the relationship between student race and the school locations where students were disciplined. Situated within the frame of CRT, the study examined the sub-contexts and racial patterns that correlated with discipline incidents in various school settings, such as the classroom, hallways, restrooms, auditoriums, and school grounds (Anyon et al., 2018). Overall, this study determined that the location where Black and Hispanic/Latine students were more likely to be disciplined than any other location on the school campus was in the classroom. Black students were less likely than their Hispanic/Latine, Multiracial, and White peers to be referred for discipline in unowned spaces with less adult contact, such as general school grounds, athletic fields, bathrooms, or off campus. Hispanic/Latine and Multiracial students were equally as likely as their White peers to be disciplined across all learning spaces on campus. However, unlike Hispanic/Latine, Multiracial, and White students, Black students were at the highest risk for discipline in the classroom setting

with teachers with whom they had the most contact regularly. Compared to their peers, Black students were targeted in the classroom more consistently than any other racial group of students by the classroom teachers with whom they had the most contact. Overall, the authors' findings suggested that the overrepresentation of Black youth in discipline referrals originating from the classroom setting was a widespread pattern when compared to the number of discipline referrals for White, Hispanic/Latine, and Multiracial peers in classroom settings. Anyon et al. (2018) suggested that discipline policies and practices were systemic, going beyond the prejudicial decisions of individual staff members. These patterns found in this study indicated the existence of systemic bias and racism at the institutional or meso level, beyond the beliefs and behaviors of building-level leaders and educators who have weak relationships with Black, Hispanic/Latine, and Multiracial students in these owned classroom settings (Anyon et al., 2018).

Anyon et al. (2018) argued that reform must occur at the macro level to disrupt the privilege, power, and oppression often hinted at but never addressed in the school discipline literature to achieve successful discipline policy changes. The findings of this study align with the tenets of CRT that assert that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life and presume that the history of racism has contributed to all current disparities (e.g., income, education, health) (Anyon et al., 2018; Matsuda et al., 1993).

Education at the Micro-Level

In education, the micro level is a tool to explore the definitions of race identities, what happens to small groups or individuals, and how they interpret their lived experiences (Byng, 2013). In education, Kohli et al. (2017) argued that racism had been normalized through new, more covert, or hidden racist practices. Therefore, it is imperative to research the everyday, normalized acts of racism tied to societal macro structures (Holt, 1995; Kohli et al., 2017). In

education, these everyday micro events are demonstrated in the practices of teachers and administrators and expose internalized manifestations of institutionalized racism (Holt, 1995). Considering how much evidence exists regarding racism at the macro and meso levels of educational policy and practice, less research exists at the micro level of everyday encounters of racism in the educational system (Kohli et al., 2017). Holt (1995) and Kohli et al. (2017) argued that attention must be paid to how micro-level racist events connect to macrostructures of racial injustice because it is this normalization of everyday incidents of racism that obstructs our ability to dismantle systemic racism.

Two themes that emerge from research that explores everyday racism in K–12 education are: a) how White teachers perpetuate racism in schools; and b) how students experience racism in schools (Kohli et al., 2017). The following micro-level comparative case study by Hotchkins (2016) touches on both themes by exploring the racial microaggressions experienced by Black male students based on the prejudicial beliefs held by White teachers.

In order to appreciate the significance of the next study, it is important to understand the notion of multidimensionality. Multidimensionality is an extension of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality research which was initially used to demonstrate the multidimensional interactions between race and gender that shaped the employment experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) sought to disrupt the inclination to see gender and race as separate categories. In addition, intersectionality scholarship was a tool used to disrupt the tendency to treat oppressed people as monolithic groups, requiring researchers to recognize that all forms of subordination are interlocked and mutually reinforcing (Matsuda, 1991a). Failing to use intersectionality theory when conducting research centers the privileged class over groups of oppressed people experiencing intersecting subordination (Hutchinson, 2001). The purpose of

using intersectionality theory is to explore the intersections between forms of oppression rather than intersecting oppression with privilege (Hutchinson, 2001).

Informed by intersectionality theory, multidimensionality is a tool useful for investigating the intersection between oppression and power, reminding oppressed groups that the hierarchy of all forms of personal identity is influenced by the legal and social interests of the group members and the biases group members hold about race, gender, and other identity features (Valdes, 1997). Research must expand beyond essentialism to expose the interconnectivity of oppression and to develop more complex responses to oppression that treat the complexities of oppression as a universal phenomenon instead of treating such research as relevant only to those individuals who experience multiple forms of oppression (Valdes, 1997). Hutchinson (2001) argued that using multidimensionality complicates privilege and oppression. Hutchinson's (2001) scholarship exposed heterosexual stereotypes that promoted sexualized racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people. For example, lynchings of Black males were "justified because racist, sexualized rhetoric was used to claim Black males as heterosexual threats to White women" (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 1366). Multidimensionality permits a more nuanced analysis of the privilege and oppression of social groups (Hutchinson, 2001). Mutua (2013) suggested that through observation and gathering comprehensive experiential knowledge from those within those systems, multidimensionality is a useful framework to analyze interactions between individuals and the complexities of the social hierarchies that impact all forms of personal identity.

Using multidimensionality theory, Hotchkins (2016) focused on lived experiences of multiple individuals to understand how Black male students strategically responded to racial microaggressions by White teachers. For this comparative case study, Hotchkins (2016) captured

the individual participant voices as units of analysis to understand how six Black males experienced microaggressions in a diverse high school in a Mountain West state, specifically focusing on in-class interactions with White teachers and out-of-class peer interactions. Students met three criteria to qualify as participants: a) attended this Mountain West school; b) self-identified as Black or African American; and c) were enrolled in curricular or extracurricular activities. The author conducted one focus group, used storytelling to gather narratives, and completed two observations of each participant to contextualize the two follow-up interviews to clarify emerging themes and allow for participant reactions. The study examined these interactions through the lens of CRT at both a structural and individual level to identify systemic racism and how Black males overcame racialized interactions with White teachers. Using multidimensionality, Hotchkins (2016) recognized the intersection of race and gender of Black males in this study.

Hotchkins (2016) found that the microaggressions Black male students experienced stemmed directly from interactions with their White teachers. First, these Black male students perceived that their White teachers waged deficit thinking to perpetuate negative stereotypes about them. These participants felt that White teachers saw them multidimensionally, as both Black and male, leading to gendered and racial monolithic targeting, viewing them as a collective in deficit terms. Finally, these Black male students believed White teachers verbally labeled them as disengaged in the educational process and disobedient with problematic behaviors. This study could illustrate that it would be better for Black male students if White teachers were colorblind. However, multidimensionality anticipates and exposes the fallacy of colorblindness ideology. The microaggressions that teachers exhibit reinforce CRT research that White teachers have inherent racial biases (Ladson-Billings, 2004). The White teachers in this

study used the students' racial and gender identity as a function of gendered racism directed at Black male students (Hotchkins, 2016).

In response to monolithic targeting by White teachers, Hotchkins (2016) found that Black male students shared two specific strategies they used to avoid these racial microaggressions: (a) behavioral vacillation (BV) avoidance strategy; and (b) integrative mobility (IM) avoidance strategy. BV avoidance strategy describes a student's ability to avoid reinforcing negative teacher perceptions of stereotypical Black male behavior by adjusting their behavior in direct relation to their proximity to the school environment. For example, Black males might dress up to attend school and dress more comfortably away from school. One participant in the study described the BV avoidance strategy in this way:

It is better to be invisible and left alone than to be myself, and be watched, then singled out, then made a mockery of for little or no obvious reasons. I just fade to black and try not to be noticed, then turn up when I am away from school! (Hotchkins, 2016, p. 19)

IM avoidance strategy includes intentional actions by Black males to form meaningful alliances with other racialized student populations beyond their Black social circles (Hotchkins, 2016). For example, in out-of-class learning spaces, Black males sought out interactions with racially diverse peers for encouragement and to receive academic support. Another study participant of the study by Hotchkins (2016), illustrated IM avoidance strategy with the following reflection on social acceptance:

If I didn't have friends like Stephanie (White) and David, this Chinese dude, I'd definitely be in trouble in class. They keep me attached to not only the assignments, but try to get me involved. We study together. Always get in the same work group. They ask

my questions for me because teachers usually just ignore me, but respond to them. That works for me! (p. 22)

Hotchkins (2016) incorporated observation and detailed counterstorytelling by Black male students to illustrate the overt racial insults, invalidations, and assaults enacted by White teachers. Relying on the lived experiences of Black male students ties back to the CRT claim that counterstorytelling is a credible research tool to examine racial oppression (Matsuda et al., 1993), to identify elements of racism in K–20 education systems, and to expose inequities (Solórzano, 1998). In addition, CRT identifies the knowledge and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine individuals as legitimate (Bell, 1987, 1992). Further, studies like this illustrate how CRT challenges dominant ideologies that require neutrality and objectivity in educational research (Hotchkins, 2016) by opposing notions of meritocracy and colorblindness (Parker et al., 1999; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004).

CRT also theorizes about the intersectionality of racism with other forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Related to monolithic targeting, CRT recognizes multidimensionality as an extension of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality (Hotchkins, 2016). Through the lens of intersectionality, Black males are seen as Black and male, and this combination allows for gendered racism that further marginalizes these students through White teachers' racial microaggressions, reaffirming that "Black males are under racial siege in K–20 environments" (Hotchkins, 2016, p. 8; Mutua, 2013). Recognizing this concept of racial siege demonstrates how multidimensionality can be used as a tool to illuminate how all forms of personal identity are influenced by the legal and social interests of the group members and the biases the group members hold about race, gender, and other identity features (Valdes, 1997). The Black male students at this high school are subject to the constraints, influences, and biases

the White teachers hold about what it means to be Black and male. However, through continued production of knowledge framed in CRT, educational reform could position Black students to be change agents in the transformation of their own schools and communities to best meet their own interests and society at large (Dixson et al., 2006).

Applications of Critical Race Theory To My Critical Autoethnographic Study

CRT demands that racism be centered in research analysis and that scholars' work should focus on deconstructing and rejecting patterns of oppression and exclusion rooted in racism (Dixson et al., 2006). CRT also argues that for those working alongside and with marginalized groups, CRT scholars must reject internalized white supremacy and exercise humility (Matsuda, 1987). Tenets from CRT were used throughout this autoethnographic study to inform data analysis and findings as they related to my experiences as a White cisgender female administrator as the unit of analysis.

Critical White Studies

Definition of Critical White Studies

If CRT in education offers a rich analysis of the harm of systemic racism on Black, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people, then CWS interrogates the role and presence of whiteness that lead to racial trauma (Cabrera, 2022). In February of 1860, a Brooklyn school teacher named William J. Johnson, writing as "Ethiop", published an article in *Anglo-African Magazine* entitled, "What Shall We Do With the White People?" (Roediger, 2001). If CWS cannot answer Ethiop's question, it offers a framework for studying White people (Roediger, 2001). An offshoot of CRT, CWS examines whiteness's social construction and implications to expose and deconstruct its social and political link to white privilege and white supremacy

(Guess, 2006). CWS should be used to alleviate racialized harm caused by white supremacy (Matias, 2022). Applebaum (2016) defines CWS as:

A growing field of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege. CWS presumes a particular conception of racism that is connected to white supremacy. In advancing the importance of vigilance among White people, CWS examines the meaning of white privilege and white privilege pedagogy and how white privilege is connected to complicity in racism. (p. 1)

CWS overlaps with CRT, as demonstrated by a focus on the legal and social construction of white racial identity and the use of narratives to expose systems of racial power (Haney-Lopez, 2006). For White scholars, CWS is a reflective tool to look behind the mirror, dismantle conventional wisdom, and ask critical questions about race, society, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). For Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine scholars, as a survival tool, CWS offers insight into what it means to be White in a majority White society (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). Rather than focus on the victims of racism, the starting point for CWS is to make the invisible norm of whiteness visible and make sense of whiteness that hides behind and appears rooted in good intentions (Applebaum, 2016).

History of Critical White Studies

No official group of Black people has critically studied whiteness and formally recorded research in written material. Nevertheless, an understanding of whiteness was borne out of a close examination of White people to help Black people survive and cope within a white supremacist society (hooks, 1992). For many generations, Black scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, James Baldwin, bell hooks, Franz Fanon, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison have argued that whiteness is the root cause of racism (Applebaum, 2016). Frankenberg (1993) defined

whiteness as a location of structural advantage or race privilege, a standpoint from which White people look at themselves, others, and society, and a set of cultural practices that are unnamed and unmarked. As shared through the lens of CRT, Harris (1993) suggested that whiteness is best understood as a form of property rights systemically protected by law that benefit White people while marginalizing others socially, culturally, politically, and institutionally. Within a system rooted in whiteness, White people with good intentions can still be individually complicit in sustaining a racially unjust system (Harris, 1993).

CWS aims to expose the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and white dominated systems of power and privilege (Applebaum, 2016). Foundational CWS research focused on the social construction of whiteness and how Italians, the Irish, and the Jewish became White people in American society (Applebaum, 2016). This scholarship demonstrated the fluidity of whiteness by studying who does and does not get to be considered white throughout different regions and eras as well as the intersectionality of other social groups in the United States and the world. Only recently has the critical study of whiteness become an academic field devoted to disrupting racism by “problematizing whiteness as a corrective to the traditional exclusive focus on the racialized other” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 1).

Given how power is distributed within education systems and society, CRT scholars argued that the behavior of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people has always been defined in negative ways and controlled by members of the dominant White group (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, the 1990s saw a sharp increase in attention given to scholarship that concerned whiteness. Scholars insisted that “both the origins and reproduction of white identity demand explanation” (Roediger, 2001, p. 73). The result was strong attention from publications focused on cultural and intellectual trends as more White Americans produced

research exploring the origins and reproductions of white identity promoted as if this were a novel concept (Roediger, 2001).

Research conducted by Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latine scholars that examined race, class, gender, and sexuality provided the foundation for the comprehensibility of CWS (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). White scholars benefited from this scholarship, and the massive growth of whiteness studies reflected the irony of the white privilege they enjoyed while, at the same time, dismissing the long and deep oral history and study of White people by people of color (Roediger, 2001). The disappearance of the deep history of Black people studying White people perpetuates the racist idea that Black people cannot see White people because Black people are seen as sub-human, incapable of critical thought (hooks, 1992). Academic assumptions that the study of whiteness is an endeavor for White scholars represent both an incessant centering of whiteness and a continual refusal to take seriously the insights into whiteness from Black scholars and scholars of color (Roediger, 2001). Jupp and Badenhorst (2021) suggested that CWS emerged from the intellectual traditions of Black scholars and then further developed in two waves between 1980 and 2020.

Evolution in the Field of Critical White Studies

Jupp and Badenhorst (2021) explained that between 1980 and 2000, the first wave of CWS emphasized white colorblind racism and race evasion. White colorblind racism and race evasion refer to acts of White people through speech and behavior to negate, deny, mitigate, evade, or diminish the profound impact of race in society. Colorblindness denies seeing race, while race evasiveness acknowledges but diminishes the impact of race in both historical and current social inequities (Jupp et al., 2018). Colorblind racism and race evasion seek to ignore race and attempt to see each person as an individual. However, Neville et al. (2013) argue that it

is unrealistic and harmful not to see color or disregard another person's race in a society that is as racially stratified as the United States. For example, Correll et al. (2008) found that in high-conflict situations, a colorblind strategy was more likely to increase prejudice toward Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people. However, through narrative and qualitative data collection, social sciences research validated White research participants' race-evasive speech and colorblind racism during this first wave of CWS between 1980 and 2000.

Between 2000 and 2020, CWS research shifted to an anti-essentialist position toward whiteness, which used empirical evidence to demonstrate the complexities of whiteness, and that no essential experience exists among people of a particular oppressed or privileged group (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). Anti-essentialism recognizes that not all Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine experience identical forms of racism and serves to expose and dismantle misconceptions about the numerous ways racism manifests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). During these last 20 years, CWS research focused on a broad spectrum of topics that illustrated the impact of systemic racism and magnified the role of whiteness in racial inequities (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). For this autoethnographic study, white materiality and white racial identity development are the two specific CWS concepts that will be highlighted in this next section of the literature review.

White Materiality

White materiality points to the importance of the body and phenotypes to explore how race works within material and social contexts to demonstrate the inherent advantages of whiteness (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). Fanon (2008) defines this as epidermal schema, or “a pattern of behavior, a set of capabilities and constraints dividing people based on their skin color into two separate worlds” (p. 92). Saldanha (2010) argues that through these behaviors, “the

epidermal schema has the potential to replace the body image a human being creates for himself or herself through a very superficial and simplistic essentialism—skin tells worth” (p. 2412).

White people understand their privilege as fundamentally expressed through their bodies or skin. The scholarship of CWS moved beyond highlighting white privilege as expressed through the body to attempts at explaining the intersectional complexities of white racial identities (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021).

White Racial Identity Development

CWS examined race as co-constructed multidimensional white identities intersecting gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, region, and language. Although acceptance of CWS studies in education has increased, there remains a lack of research documenting practical and effective implementations of White educator identity studies (Tanner, 2017). Tanner (2017) argued that much of CWS research focusing on white identity studies over-relies on McIntosh’s (1988) white privilege framework. McIntosh (1988) created a tool to help her self-reflect on the daily effects of white skin color privilege in her life. This white privilege knapsack pedagogy was employed in the education field to allow educators to reflect on how membership in a majority race includes privileges that make their lives easier (McIntosh, 1988). Tanner (2017) warned that McIntosh’s work is limited to identifying colorblind identities, often leading to confessional pedagogies that impede anti-racism work related to racial identity development with White educators. White privilege pedagogy demands the ritual of confession, leading White people to believe that their confession of white privilege is their antiracist action or results in resistance to confession and antiracist action (Lensmire et al., 2013).

William Cross (1971), an early pioneer in ethnic identity studies—specifically Black identity development—used a Nigrescence (Black racial identity) model to illustrate the stages

Black or African Americans go through while developing a fully integrated racial identity. Fashioned after the work of Cross (1971, 1991), which focused on Black racial identity development, Helms (1990) developed a White racial identity development framework that viewed racial identity development more as a psychological event than a process. Through the lens of psychological research, Helms (1990) defined racial identity as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular group” (p. 3). Helms’ framework is limited because it assumes Black and White people develop racial identities similarly. In addition, it relies too heavily on White people’s self-identification and reporting on their awareness of whiteness, encouraging White people to deny the relevance of their membership in whiteness.

CWS expanded from white racial identity research rooted in psychology to include sociological research to show the socially constructed nature of racial categories (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). CWS anchored in sociology does illustrate how whiteness has been a mechanism for boundary maintenance to benefit White people and disenfranchise other races, but CWS research within the field of sociology does not fully capture systemic racial oppression (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). Jupp (2013) fought for the recognition of the second wave of CWS that approached white identity and the association with white supremacy with the necessary sophistication and nuance while remaining rooted in Black intellectual traditions. CWS that acknowledges the relationship between white identity development and white supremacy allows White educators to begin to comprehend the complexities of their white racial identities, to awaken to their complicity in a system rooted in white supremacy, and to learn how to fight against systems of oppression (Jupp et al., 2016). CWS, rooted in antiracist approaches, can interrogate and disrupt white privilege and systems of oppression by unclocking whiteness.

However, these approaches can still fall short by assuming white privilege benefits all white identities the same without accounting for multiple points of intersectionality, such as class and gender (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021).

Feagin (2013) addresses white racial identity development in a way that does acknowledge the complexities of the many intersectionalities that can exist within a white racial frame, such as gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Influenced by the research of Black scholars focused on counter-system analysis, Feagin (2013) defined a white racial frame as the dominant frame in society that is “an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (p. 3). In everyday situations, White people consciously or unconsciously use white racial framing to highlight and center the virtues of whiteness while also using the frame to evaluate and relate to Americans of color (Feagin, 2013).

Bell (1995b) argued for the critical analysis of the dominant culture of whiteness through his counter-framed view of racial realism, which is the perspective that Black people will never achieve full equality due to the permanence of racism. Feagin (2013) drew from Derrick Bell’s counter-framing perspective, stating that for the dominant white racial frame to be analyzed and addressed in society, White people must change their framing. To effectively lead educators toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Without an anchor in the framework of CWS, racial identity development can foster further racism (Feagin, 2013). White people must go through the process of changing their framing by acquiring the knowledge and experience needed to engage in the process of redeveloping their white racial frame from a position of racial

arrogance to one of vulnerability and racial humility (Feagin, 2013). In a Zoom conversation, Dr. Feagin suggested that it can take the equivalent of at least 20 weekend-long learning sessions for a White person to begin acquiring the knowledge and experience needed to engage in the process of dismantling one's white racial frame (J. Feagin, personal communication, May 29, 2020). Developing a white racial frame through a systemic lens is critical because white supremacy is institutionalized at all levels of society (Feagin, 2013). I contend that Feagin's (2013) work focused on white racial framing is ideal for this study because it allows a White person to identify and make sense of the complex intersectionalities that inform their own white racial frame and to recognize the impact of white supremacy at the macro, meso, and micro levels of society in their everyday lives. "For the most part, large-scale systems of oppression are not carried out by wild-eyed extremists with major psychological disorders, but by ordinary people in daily routines" (Feagin, 2013, p. 141). Racism is the convergence of meanings from all three levels of society and the process of conveying these meanings repeatedly across all social levels (Byng, 2013). "Attention has to be paid to which race identities come to the fore and fade in social discourses as policy agendas shift because even when agendas are not explicitly racial they have racial implications in a society that is racialized" (Byng, 2013, p. 710). Feagin's (2013) work has been influential on the development of my own white racial frame over time and will continue to be a tool I use over the remaining course of my lifetime.

Applying these new iterations of CWS to old issues exposes how the social and material formation of whiteness maintains systems of apartheid, racial inequalities, and segregation. This second wave of CSW builds upon research from the first wave and encourages re-engagement with those ideas to develop new pedagogical work (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). By moving away from transmissive and over-simplistic research and moving toward a historic and oppositional

critique of whiteness and White identities, CWS can improve American educational settings through decolonial alternatives (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021).

Application of Critical White Studies

Originally, Black people closely examined White people to help them survive and cope within a white supremacist society (hooks, 1992). However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, White academics in the United States began creating a new discipline called “whiteness studies.” Whiteness studies began as a reaction to the literary canon wars, which debated the controversial centrality of White authors and how their perspectives within the social construction of whiteness influenced American literature and American history (Murray, 2020). This research then expanded across disciplines of “literary criticism, history, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, art history, dance history, humor studies, philosophy, linguistics, and folklore” (Fishkin, 1995, p. 428). Phillips (1990) concluded that Black studies “must be integrated into our understanding of American society, for our understanding of White American society is incomplete without an understanding of the Black and African impact on White America” (p. 237).

Similar to CRT scholarship, by the late 1990s, scholars began to apply concepts of CWS to curriculum theory in the field of education. Finally, by the early 2000s, it began to include research dedicated to the entire field of education (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). The following section will demonstrate how CWS has been applied to education, specifically white educational environments, whiteness pedagogy, and White educator identity studies (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021).

Applications of Critical White Studies in Education

CWS has several common facets applicable to education, which include: (a) whiteness can be internalized and impacts all people in society; (b) White people have a limited understanding of their role in systemic oppression; and (c) whiteness perpetuates a racist system, especially in schooling (Aronson et al., 2020). In recent decades, scholars have begun to apply the concepts of CWS to white educational environments, whiteness pedagogy, and White educator identity studies (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). Because my autoethnographic study investigates my personal experiences as a White cisgender female elementary principal at the micro level of education, this next section of the literature review will highlight three micro-level studies that applied CWS to explore the role of racism in education at the small group or individual level.

Black Male Students Navigate Racial Microaggressions. This first study applied CWS at the small-group level to investigate prospective teachers' student teaching practicums. Research conducted by Willey and Magee (2018) focused on prospective teachers' student teaching experiences and discourses in urban schools and how whiteness and racism obstructed the development of culturally responsive teachers. Willey and Magee (2018) argued that although the population of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students continues to increase, not much has changed in teacher education programs. Currently, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students make up 52% of the student population in American public schools, while 80% of teachers and 77% of principals identify as White (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018; United States Census Bureau, 2018). The racial disproportion between students and educators requires continued reflection on our schools' unanswered racial inequities and continued investigation into how race factors into school

practices. In addition, student teachers can be implicated in perpetuating existing racism in school structures and practices due to their unpreparedness, so using CWS allowed researchers to understand how these educators internalize, enact, or resist culturally relevant practices (Willey & Magee, 2018).

Willey and Magee (2018) used CWS to center whiteness as a racist system and reflective lens through which student teachers analyzed their own teaching. Willey and Magee (2018) studied prospective teachers' learning and instructional delivery, along with exploring the dynamics of the racial identities and cultures of prospective teacher candidates over time. Data from field notes collected from teacher education program seminars, assignments, and communication following formal and informal observations were collected over six years to include four cohorts of 24 to 28 prospective teachers, and data were synthesized into vignettes (Willey & Magee, 2018). Willey and Magee (2018) found that prospective teachers engaged in deficit-oriented preoccupation with student behavior and abdication of responsibility as maneuvers to avoid critical self-interrogation related to racism and inequities in schools. The authors found that student teachers routinely used dramatic or violent terms to exclusively describe the behavior of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students, not White students, as an example of deficit-oriented preoccupation with student behaviors they felt were beyond their responsibility. This preoccupation with student behavior is an example of how the White teachers in this study absolved themselves of the responsibility for student behaviors. CWS scholars would argue that the problem is not student behaviors but rather the teachers' lack of racial identity development (Willey & Magee, 2018). I contend that White educators must reflect on how their racial identity contributes to racially inequitable situations.

A second insight from the study suggested clinical supervision experiences are opportunities to hide behind whiteness or challenge the presence and role of whiteness, noting that the teacher supervisor's role is critical to exposing prospective teachers to culturally relevant pedagogy. Willey and Magee (2018) concluded that clinical field supervisors do not adequately disrupt dominant patterns of school inequities. Supervisors must develop the skills to facilitate the growth of prospective teachers who must also come with a level of racial awareness to recognize and acknowledge oppression and racial inequities in schools. Skillful mediation is required to expose systemic racism that is often neglected or glossed over in education, from the macro to the micro level, if clinical teaching experiences are to move beyond surface-level ideas of white privilege and white savior mentality (Willey & Magee, 2018). CWS argues that racism is ingrained in our education system and will always be the default action unless otherwise confronted (Milner, 2003). Therefore, teachers must overcome colorblindness toward an antiracist white racial identity if systemic racism is to be disrupted. "Antiracist teachers understand that no content area is safe from whiteness and racism and that everything touching schools and the children in them are threatened" (Willey & Magee, 2018, p. 35).

Reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Through a Critical Race Theory/Critical White Studies Lens. The second study explored CWS research conducted at the micro level related to whiteness pedagogies in education, specifically investigating the learning experiences of a small group of high school students reading canonical American literature. Using both CRT and CWS, the following case study by Dyches and Thomas (2020) focused on the successes and challenges experienced by 24 high school students while reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884). Dyches and Thomas (2020) centered on students' voices using pre- and post-unit survey data, students' written responses, and class conversations to capture student

learning experiences. The authors used inductive analysis to determine that the students in this study were able to notice manifestations of CRT and CWS tenets both in the novel and in their social worlds. For example, while students could engage critically with the novel, White students resisted conversations about race, with some exhibiting blatantly hostile, demeaning, and destructive white rage against any antiracist pedagogy. In contrast, one Black student expressed the following in response to his experience reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “It is more so what I have NOT been able to read [in school] that has shaped how I view literature in our schools and society” (Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 45).

Discussions from the study included recognizing that teachers can only become antiracists with teacher educators who model antiracist pedagogies and dispositions (Dyches & Thomas, 2020). Too often, new teachers default to traditional pedagogy to teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because opportunities were missed to educate student teachers about social justice. After all, English teachers cannot neglect to interrogate their canonical complicity (Dyches & Thomas, 2020). The implication of this study is the role teachers play in these racialized discussions. White educators need to use their understanding of CWS and awareness of their own white racial identity to help White students develop their own white racial identities. The study also illuminated the continuum of emotions and racialized responses the students had toward implementing antiracist pedagogies. The authors noticed that asking students to do more than “just read” a novel but to do so through the lens of CRT/CWS created a sense of loss of comfort for students, which can lead to resistance or anger. English educators need to help student teachers “expect and weather students’ continuum of emotions to antiracist pedagogies and understand that resistance is not a reason for retreat” (Baszile, 2008; Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 48). Implications from Dyches and Thomas (2020) include preparing educators of

English literature to interrogate and disrupt canonical ideologies and for all stakeholders to research and employ best practices to prepare potential teachers to be unapologetically antiracist disruptors of systemic oppression in education (Dyches & Thomas, 2020). Through the lens of CWS, it appears the participants in this study did not have the skills or capacity to support students' interrogation and disruption of canonical ideologies because they had not yet fully developed their own white racial identity. I am inclined to state that school leaders need to develop their white racial frame to access the leadership skills needed to support teachers to advance teachers' understanding of their white racial frame.

White Suburban School Leadership Counternarrative. This final study applied CWS at the micro level, specifically the individual white racial identity development of a White female school principal. Research conducted by Irby et al. (2019) used both CRT and CWS to analyze a White female school principal's experience of racial conflict and loss of power because she implemented antiracist policies. The principal of Eagle Wings High School, Elizabeth, initiated a wide-range equity reform effort in her building in response to an Office of Civil Rights action to place the district on notice for performance improvement. The study examined how her leadership decisions for Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students related to her racial identity and meaning-making. Typically used as a CRT tenet to uphold the voices of Black scholars and scholars of color, counter stories (i.e., from White participants) were used in this study as narratives summarized from field notes, interview transcripts, memos, and other research data (Irby et al., 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b). Because the White participant, Elizabeth, was experiencing a loss in power, Irby et al. (2019) felt this specific story represented a counternarrative to the typical dominant racial discourse of white leadership.

The Irby et al. (2019) study also incorporated a racial ambivalence framework from CWS, which embraces the multiple intersectionalities of white racial identities. The racial ambivalence framework includes the following ideas: (a) White people know they are white but may not realize the implications of their whiteness; (b) whiteness must be articulated within the full complexity of the historical and social forces that influence the formation and reproduction of White people and racism; (c) racial consciousnesses of White people is possibly shrouded in colorblindness, allowing for only a surface understanding of racial formation; and (d) there is both much to gain and lose in working toward a deeper understanding of whiteness if the goal is to abolish it.

Irby et al. (2019) found that the mere physical presence of Black students interrupted the white student body and the school community's psychological comfort, while equity efforts create hypervisibility of these students. To disrupt systems of oppression, the leadership of White suburban school leaders requires dispositions, practices, and commitments to reckon with distinct configurations of suburban school racial oppression. "Given what we know about interest convergence, belief, care and perhaps even a possessive investment in an antiracist white identity, may be insufficient for compelling White suburban leaders to enact social justice" (Irby et al., 2019, p. 206).

Taking the position that racism is a permanent feature in our society, Irby et al. (2019) stated that true racial reform in education depends on a leader's ability to help teachers understand the "why" for changing their behaviors in response to racial realities in school. The authors explored the leadership experiences of Elizabeth, the White high school principal, as she and her leadership team undertook strong efforts to eradicate racial disparities in their school community. When Elizabeth felt she had to suspend three Black female students for fighting, she

angered members of her staff who felt an exception could have been made, especially since three of the girls were forced to miss their senior prom. However, the perspectives of these staff members were overshadowed by the overall school climate where “white supremacist ‘ways of doing things’ dominated schooling” (Irby et al., 2019, p. 202). The equity reforms Elizabeth enacted were intended to benefit students just like the eight Black female students who she suspended. However, a group of White staff members had recently formed an underground group to survey the staff about the school administrators in response to these equity reforms.

This underground group was formed in response to recent policy changes that they believed resulted in underserving Black and Hispanic/Latine students—whom they believed were incapable of higher levels of learning—getting enrolled in advanced courses. Further, the underground group of White staff members formed a Facebook page with White parents who deemed the school out of control. The administrative survey results were shared with this group of parents, the school board, and the superintendent. The impact of this experience from White teachers and White parents left Elizabeth feeling betrayed, disappointed, and feeling her efforts were futile when trying to explain that equity work did not mean favoritism. The level of hatred from members of the school community at the resulting board meeting left her feeling so unsafe, she requested an escort to her car. Following graduation, one of the Black female students who had been suspended for fighting wrote Elizabeth a letter that served as an acknowledgement of Elizabeth’s leadership efforts to face racism in the school while also calling on her to take further action to disrupt the white supremacist practices in her school community. This Black female student’s correspondence served as an interruption to the white student body and reminded Elizabeth that with intentional supports and proper resources, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students can succeed in a world rooted in white supremacy.

Twice during the study by Irby et al. (2019), Elizabeth seemed ambivalent about student resources, first suggesting that the eight Black female students should not escalate to physical fighting since they had a sisterhood affinity group as a resource. Likewise, Elizabeth expressed a lack of awareness about not meeting the school's scholarship application goal when she discovered that 35% of her White seniors applied for scholarships with only a 17% success rate. By comparison, 17% Black, Indigenous, and students of color applied for scholarships with a 100% success rate. The authors suggested that several ambivalent features of Elizabeth's white racial identity impacted her ability to be aware of and disrupt systems of oppression in her school (Irby et al., 2019). The authors found that Elizabeth held a high degree of negative emotions about her own white racial identity which influenced her perception of engaging in equity work. Along with feelings of guilt and confusion, Elizabeth also found the thought of white racial backlash overwhelming. The findings of this study illustrate how racial conflict was present between Elizabeth and her White teachers, her White parents, and with her White self.

The extent of Elizabeth's ability to enact racial change was completely dependent upon her strength as a leader to help teachers understand and change their own behaviors in order to acknowledge the racial realities of school change (Irby et al., 2019). In addition, partnering with Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people as interrupters in the school community is imperative to racial equity work for which our students can no longer wait. The authors made the following argument after examining Elizabeth's experiences: "White leaders in suburban schools should anticipate the possibilities that, should they undertake leadership for racial equity, their white professional and personal lives may get a little bit worse before they get better, if at all" (Irby et al., p. 207). Elizabeth's leadership reflected an ambivalent white racial identity rather than the identity of an anti-racist. Her emergent racial consciousness and ambivalence could have

real consequences for Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students. The authors suggested that further research would “bring forth an opportunity for Elizabeth to explore her white values, partially discard them, and take her losses—friends, status in the community, comfort—in the process” (Irby et al., p. 207).

This study by Irby et al. (2019) demonstrates two elements of CWS, the first being the concept of white materiality. The hypervisibility of Black students interrupting the student body of White students is an example of white materiality wherein the skin color of Black and White students determines their worth. In this case, White students understood their privilege as expressed through their skin color. Secondly, given that the authors suggested further research would allow Elizabeth to explore her white values more, no matter the personal cost, it illustrates the CWS stance regarding the importance of White school leaders engaging in ongoing white racial identity development.

Application of Critical White Studies to My Critical Autoethnographic Study

The existing body of qualitative research includes studies that employ CRT or CWS related to how Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students experience racism or how systemic racism influences curriculum and pedagogy. For example, as the mother of a Black male son, I found that various studies using CRT investigated how Black male students experience systemic racism in schools. Similarly, as a school leader who was often engaged in the professional development of classroom teachers, substantial literature exists regarding studies dedicated to examining how whiteness and white supremacy influence pedagogy and curriculum. However, when it came to reviewing studies focused on White female school leadership through a critical lens, the gap in research began to present itself. Studies that do focus on White female school leadership may only conduct research using CRT or CWS and often stop short of

requiring participants to “explore her white values, partially discard them, take her losses— friends, status in the community, comfort—in the process” (Irby et al., 2019, p. 207).

This critical autoethnographic study wedges a space for school leaders and leadership scholars to advance our understanding of White female school leaders, specifically concerning white privilege, white racial identity development, whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic racism. In addition, this study contributes to the deficiency in qualitative research using critical autoethnographic methods that apply the combination of CRT and CWS for White female leaders to interrogate their contribution to either sustaining or dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism in education. Irby et al. (2019) argued the following:

We do not have a sufficiently nuanced understanding of White suburban principals’ identities, challenges, and strategies for leading equity reforms in institutional contexts where whiteness is imagined as stable and unchanging (despite evidence to the contrary) and where racism structures their day-to-day ways of leading schools. (p. 195)

My study contributes toward filling the gap in research in this area, expanding on research similar to the work of Irby et al. (2019).

Kincheloe (1999) stated that CWS scholars are more equipped to explain white privilege than to explain whiteness itself. However, most observers agree that whiteness is “intimately involved with issues of power and power differences between White and non-White people” (p. 1). CWS is an extension of CRT studies in education that takes ownership of how white violence is enacted on Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people and documents the devastating effects white violence has on the souls of White people and their capacity to see racially marginalized as fully human (Irby et al., 2019; Jupp et al., 2016).

To lead educators effectively on a path toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Burns (2019) highlighted that school leaders must first engage in their racial identity development and familiarize themselves with critical epistemologies to lead effectively. Leaders can only lead what they understand. When well-versed in CRT literature related to identity development and equity initiatives, school leaders can better anticipate and respond to resistant and supportive staff (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Without an anchor in the framework of CRT and CWS, racial identity development can foster further racism (Feagin, 2013). Therefore, these concepts were utilized to focus on how my white racial frame evolved and how that evolution shaped my leadership practice.

My study demonstrates how critical autoethnography is a valuable method of study while using tenets from CRT and CWS to inform my research. For the dominant white racial frame of our society to be analyzed and dismantled, White people must go through the process of acquiring the knowledge and experience necessary to engage in the process of redeveloping their white racial frame from a position of racial arrogance to one of vulnerability and racial humility (Feagin, 2013). Through critical autoethnography, this study was informed by CRT and CWS in order to focus on my experiences at the micro level of school leadership and developing my white racial frame.

I engaged in this critical autoethnographic study to investigate my practices as a school leader. However, suppose even one female school leader can use this research as a blueprint for their commitment to vulnerable personal growth to interrogate their white privilege. In that case, this study will be worth it.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY
Introduction

In January 2019, all elementary administrators attended our monthly leadership meeting hosted by our elementary-level directors. Once our full-day meeting wrapped up for the weekend, my director, Malita and I left the larger meeting space to sit in the hallway in the two available chairs.

We discussed what happened between two service providers on the same special education team during the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting the day prior. I wanted to walk Malita through what I felt needed to happen next to support Jocelyn, one of those team members. In my previous principalship, I was able to partner with an assistant principal. I explained to Malita how—back when Crystal was an assistant principal with me—I had been complicit with the district’s demands in ways I did not want to repeat. I wish I had supported Crystal more than I had, and I felt similar dynamics were surfacing with Jocelyn. I wanted my response to be different this time.

I needed to be clear about my intentions as a building leader to support the dignity of my students of color and staff members of color, like Jocelyn. I shared that Jocelyn was experiencing racialized mobbing by staff and school community members. I would be vocal in my support of her. I wanted Jocelyn to have a safe space to speak her truth regarding her racialized experiences as a staff member and to give voice to how we needed to put the needs of all our students first in decision-making processes. I planned to support Jocelyn in the upcoming meeting in which she

planned to address her colleagues. I would not be silent this time around. I remember looking Malita directly in the eye, and saying, “There will come a time that you will abandon my leadership and me, and you protect the school district’s brand.”

Malita’s upper body arched back, her hand came to her chest, her mouth dropped open, and out came this kind of two-note nervous laugh of a sound that represented both a gasp and a smile. Taken aback, she responded, “Oh my God, Chris! That would never happen!” All I knew was that Malita would not be ready if things escalated further. They did.

This study emerged from the realization I made when asked to “just go for the lie,” highlighted in the introductory critical essay for this dissertation. Over the 2018–2019 school year, I had been on a journey of mentorship and reading to develop a deeper understanding of CRT, CWS, and white racial framing. As a result, I changed as a person, a wife, a mom, and a school leader. I was aware of racism, but as an elementary school teacher and administrator, I had spent years upholding the image of the district. However, once I chose to openly acknowledge and speak out about systems and practices rooted in white supremacy, as a school leader and as a parent, I soon became the target of the same harm I used to cause toward others. This critical autoethnography analyzed my leadership experiences as a White cisgender female elementary school principal and how my white privilege contributed to maintaining white supremacy and systemic racism. The purpose was also to explore the impact of the evolution of my white racial frame and intentionally break my silence about white supremacy and systemic racism over the 2018–2019 school year. The following research questions guided the study:

- Q1 How did my white privilege foster whiteness and contribute to white supremacy and systemic racism?
- Q2 How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?

This chapter is divided into four sections: (1) theoretical framework; (2) methodology; (3) limitations; and (4) trustworthiness.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist Epistemology

“Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). The cognitive development of human beings does not occur in isolation, but is a constant process of being shaped and formed through interactions with the environment (Kincheloe et al., 2011). The underlying philosophical perspective that qualitative research is built upon is the epistemology of constructivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Crotty (1998), constructivism for epistemological considerations focuses exclusively on the “meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (p. 58). Rather than a purely objective perception of reality, our understanding of this world is ultimately our construction, and no such construction can claim to be the absolute truth (Maxwell, 2012). As with pragmatism, constructivism focuses on how people “develop narratives and explanations which enable them not only to operate viably in their everyday lives but also to participate in the habits and customs of the group they are members of” (Larochelle, 1999, p. 6).

Lowe (1982) stated that there are two stages by which we make meaning of our reality. The first level involves constructing knowledge through hands-on, first-hand experience of an incident. The second level involves social scientists’ or outsiders’ interpretations of insider knowledge and experiences of an incident. Critical constructivism is more concerned with the first juncture of knowledge construction than the second. Each human being becomes their own research instrument drawing from their knowledge and experience. Critical constructivism does

not ascribe to positivism but contends that there is no neutral, objective truth—a position developed by the Frankfurt School—which promotes critical thinking in the research process (Crotty, 1998). Freire (1970) proposed the disruption of the banking system in education in which he equated teachers with bank clerks where the extent of the act of learning allowed to students went only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits of information received from teachers. The author expressed that knowledge is not deposited into a banking model to be withdrawn when applicable. Knowledge is socially and historically constructed, yet it is also influenced by power and privilege. Knowledge should be drawn out of students to develop inquisitive humans with a thirst for learning (Freire, 1970). Kincheloe (1999) stated that critical constructivists examine the elements that make up human consciousness. Critical constructivism seeks to shift outside the formal, dominant, and conventional way of seeing the world, traditionally rooted in empiricism and rationalism. It seeks to expose and disrupt elitist postulations and explore why certain knowledge domains are not considered valid while working with marginalized groups to elevate previously excluded knowledge and discourse (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2005).

As my own research instrument, I provided a perspective of a marginalized school leader and made connections to the frameworks of CRT and CWS. As presented in the preceding critical essay, the statement “just go for the lie” exemplifies how certain domains of knowledge are not considered valid. Since my perspective is not “the lie,” it is marginalized. To exist within the dominant system of the school district, I was told to lie. Developing my critical autoethnography allowed me to validate my knowledge through an embodied approach that recognizes emotional response as valuable to reason, experience, and knowledge (Keleş, 2022). Constructivist epistemology demands authenticity as a required condition for genuine and

meaningful learning (Jonassen, 2010). As I examined my emotional responses and how they informed my own reason, experience, and knowledge, this embodied approach demanded a deep level of vulnerability and humility for critical and meaningful learning.

Theoretical Perspective

Critical Inquiry

Within qualitative studies, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that critical research often uses critical or feminist theory, yet these studies do not always aim to take action or solve an issue while the study is happening. Instead, these types of studies are collectively critical in the sense of the theoretical framework that informs the study and in their analysis of power relations. It analyzes the data in light of the theoretical framework and the power relations of society that inform how people make meaning, which makes the study critical (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Critical inquiry uses the study's findings to challenge or analyze existing power relations to encourage others to take action (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Critical inquiry contrasts with interpretivism, or research seeking to understand (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) stated:

It is a contrast between research that seeks merely to understand and research that challenges...between research that reads the situation in terms of interaction and community, research that accepts the status quo, and research that seeks to bring about change. (p. 113)

The same knowledge controlled by elites may be their strength, but it can also represent their vulnerability (Crotty, 1998). "In critical inquiry, the study's goal in its findings or results is to critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59). CRT and CWT are the critical inquiry tools used in this autoethnographic study.

Critical Race Theory. CRT first emerged in the 1970s as counter-legal scholarship against the dominant discourse of civil rights legislation (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 2018; Delgado, 1982). In educational research, CRT can be a valuable tool of analysis to interrogate school leaders dedicated to closing the opportunity gap and establishing equitable learning experiences for all children, specifically since most school leaders today are white and monolingual (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Over the past 15 years of K–12 education research, few articles have centered racism in examining educational inequity. Because racial permanence is fundamental to our society and our schools, it is essential to build a robust body of literature that admits and fights against the devastating effects of racism (Bell, 1992; Kohli et al., 2017). This study focused on the six tenets of CRT offered by Matsuda et al. (1993). These principles were incorporated to inform the method and interpretation of results.

Critical White Studies. Adjacent to CRT, CWS examines the social construction and implications of whiteness to expose and deconstruct its social and political link to white privilege and white supremacy (Guess, 2006). CWS examines the meaning of white privilege and white privilege pedagogy and how white privilege is connected to complicity in racism (Applebaum, 2016). CWS overlaps with CRT, as demonstrated by a focus on the legal and social construction of white racial identity and the use of narratives to expose systems of racial power (Lopez, 1997). For White scholars, CWS is a reflective tool to look behind the mirror, dismantle received wisdom, and critically ask questions about race, society, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). White people must go through the process of changing their framing by acquiring the knowledge and experience needed to engage in the process of redeveloping their white racial frame from a position of racial arrogance to one of vulnerability and racial humility (Feagin, 2013). Rather than focus on the victims of racism, the starting point for CWS is to make the invisible norm of

whiteness visible (Applebaum, 2016). However, “a superficial response to changing demographics in public schools, additive frames of diversity that maintain whiteness as central often serve as substitutes for concrete discussions of race or racism, thus maintaining or exacerbating racial inequity in schools” (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 187). Investigating and exposing the effects of whiteness and white supremacy is imperative for everyone in the field of education (Marx, 2006). CWS is a tool that can be used to reveal how whiteness operates in educational contexts. Therefore, without CWS, scholars, and research, “whiteness in education will remain the hidden curriculum left intact” (Matias, 2022, p. 2). Tenets of CRT and concepts of CWS were utilized to focus on how my white racial frame evolved and how that evolution shaped my leadership practice as a single unit of analysis.

Methodology

Definition of Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, language, history and ethnographic explanation” (p. 742). Autoethnography is a form of “research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). Autoethnography can be a powerful method to explore topics of diversity and identity. It is “predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed ‘other’ and to experience it viscerally” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020, p. 15).

The act of doing autoethnography involves “the turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur” (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Autoethnography can be

distinguished from other personal writing because of the following characteristics: (a) autoethnography is “purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices; (b) making contributions to existing research; (c) embracing vulnerability with purpose; and (d) creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 22). Using insider’s knowledge, autoethnographic writers “use personal experiences to create detailed, vivid descriptions, and insight into taboo or terrifying experiences to facilitate understanding” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 33). Further, intersecting identity factors, such as race, social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and age, influence our self-experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020). In the last decade, qualitative scholars have embraced intersectionality in their research more regularly. However, autoethnographic scholars have routinely used their multiple intersectionalities to situate their stories, expose positions of privilege, and reveal moments of vulnerability (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020).

Definition of Critical Autoethnography

Stemming from autoethnography research focused on researching the self in relation to others, critical autoethnography shares a similar feature to critical ethnography in that both “begin with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2011, p. 5). Critical autoethnography uses critical theory as the analysis framework to investigate social phenomena (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020). Critical autoethnography can be used to “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience” to inform readers about situational oppression in a way that other researchers would not be able to know (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). When defining autoethnography as a critical method, Boylorn and Orbe (2020) used three features of critical theory: (a) to understand the lived experiences of real people in context; (b) to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements;

(c) and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (p. 20). “Critical autoethnographers are invested in the ‘politics of positionality’ (Madison, 2011) that require researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization, and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020, p. 15). Critical autoethnography can be a powerful methodology for the author to provide disruption of the dominance of one group over another to represent voices unheard or actively silenced (Allen-Collinson, 2013). By critically analyzing the researcher’s own experiences in educational spaces, critical autoethnographic studies provide a social critique accounting for social phenomena within societal spaces and the researchers themselves (Allen-Collinson, 2013). As Sparkes (2002) stated:

This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation. In such circumstances, the potential for individual and collective restorying is enhanced. (p. 221)

Using a critical autoethnographic method for this study allowed my research and analysis to go beyond reconstructing a lived experience into an examination that is deeply vulnerable, critical, personal, and transformational (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

Rationale

As the only participant in this study, further inquiry was needed to examine my experiences as a White female school principal critically. Qualitative methodologies are used when little is known about the research problem, and further inquiry is needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is “utilized to discover meanings and interpretations by

studying cases intensively in natural settings” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 650). Critical autoethnography allows the reader to witness “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 110). Critical autoethnography is a relatively new form of autoethnography, which has rapidly grown in social sciences in recent years (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

The field of education is a mirror of society, including patterns of marginalization and privilege (Marx et al., 2017). Personal stories about being a part of and living through patterns of privilege and marginalization expose readers to the ways we are affected by or contribute to institutionalized power and privilege (Marx et al., 2017). As such, this study’s critical autoethnographic approach provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of a White female elementary school administrator. In addition, this study helped explore what led up to and resulted from the circumstances that required me to defend my leadership as an elementary school principal. My first-hand personal leadership experiences in this critical autoethnography were analyzed through the critical lenses of CRT and CWS at the micro level.

These concepts were used to inform the literature review. They also guided the method of this critical autoethnographic study to focus on me as the unit of analysis and was used to interpret results. My unique positionality, explained in the next section, explains why my study was suited for a critical autoethnographic approach.

Participant and Researcher Positionality

For this critical autoethnography, I was the only unit of analysis as both the researcher and the participant. In autoethnography, the researcher is also the subject of the research. To understand a phenomenon, researchers draw on their own experiences. As the sole participant in the study, I used a critical lens rooted in both CRT and CWS to analyze and reflexively critique

my actions and experiences with an analytical, reflective approach. Grbich (2013) stated that external analysis calls for a focus on social and cultural aspects of personal experiences, while an internal examination exposes a vulnerable self that may be inspired by or resistant to cultural interpretations. I am a White, cisgender female elementary school administrator who served my entire career in one suburban school district. Throughout my career, I have accumulated over 25 years of experience serving as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal in the same district. In addition, I am a White female who is married to a Black male. I am also a mother to our biological son, who identifies as a Black male student who attended grades K–12 within the same district where I served as an administrator. Out of all the members of our administrative council, I was the only White female who parented a Black son while serving as an administrator in the same district where he attended school.

My experiences informed my research focus as a White cisgender female school administrator charged with leadership for equity to best serve the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, coupled with my experience of parenting a son who identifies as Black and attends school within the same suburban school district. As a school leader committed to leadership for equity, I must have a clear understanding of the roles culture and race have played in my life. It was imperative to examine my lived experiences, beliefs, core values, and perceptions and assess how they may influence the research. Conducting research as the researcher and the researched requires critical self-reflection through reflexivity to self-monitor any possible impact my lived experiences may have had on the research as both an insider and outsider while situating my emotions within the culture (Grbich, 2013). Probst and Berenson (2014) note, “Reflexivity is generally understood as the awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being

studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions” (p. 814).

My positioning of the research includes the assumption that power relations are everywhere, including in the research itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Change is constantly happening, and even discussing issues changes consciousness (Kemmis et al., 2014). Through personal vulnerability, I aimed to shed light on whether the critical self-reflection of a White female school principal informed leadership for equity to disrupt racial oppression within one school district. Using tenets from CRT and elements of CWS, I also sought to explore how my white racial frame evolved and shaped my leadership practice. Through the lens of CRT, Harris (1993) stated that whiteness is best understood as a form of property rights systemically protected by laws that benefit White people while marginalizing others. Through the lens of CWS, Frankenberg (1993) defined whiteness as a location of structural advantage or race privilege, a standpoint from which White people look at themselves, others, and society. I investigated how my white privilege disrupted or fostered whiteness, contributing to racism and institutionalized oppression.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data Collection

“Do you have any questions about our discussion today?” my supervisor asked me. She was attempting to end a meeting I was asked to attend with three additional district personnel, one of whom represented me. I assured Malita that I had no questions other than how long I had to respond to the findings presented to me. In April 2019, I went through some experiences where my leadership as an elementary school administrator was questioned. As a result, I was put in a position to defend myself and my leadership as an elementary school principal. Initially,

I gathered artifacts in response to the information presented to me by these district leaders. However, my information gathering evolved because of an experience I survived years ago.

As a senior in high school, I survived a rape at gunpoint. Surviving such an intense trauma left me feeling alone, viscerally angry, and needing to process my emotions to cope and survive. One of the tools that worked well for me was writing a journal. Sometimes those notes were back and forth with others, but mostly, it was a private practice that helped me make sense of the trauma and heal—that and listening to music. When my leadership was questioned, once again trying to make sense of the circumstance I found myself in, I went back to taking notes to cope and survive. These notes were generated from various sources, such as my memory, calendar entries, emails, and text messages. These data sources were the material I referenced as my data set.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, “data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (p. 105). The role of a skilled researcher is to notice what can serve as data through listening, watching, and being aware of the self or others. Various methods can be used to collect data. Therefore, a researcher must choose methods that align with the purpose of their study and will best answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of autoethnography does not always follow traditional social science research. Autoethnographers collect and interpret data in various ways and often improvise or change their methods during the process (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). An advantage and challenge of autoethnography is its “methodological openness,” which allows for various data collection methods, ranging from field notes and interviews to vivid personal memories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 64). In this critical autoethnography, I used three sources of

data: personal memory, document analysis, and essays to reflect on the evolution of my white racial frame and its impact on my school leadership.

Personal Memory. Toward the end of the 2018–2019 school year, circumstances compelled me to take notes on specific events and conversations. These quick chronological notes ranged from a keyword to a few sentences from which I could later recall a specific experience or an entire conversation. During this process, I left my notes unedited to capture my emotions and perceptions of the experience at the time, only adding a date and time notation. Most of my notes were documented on my personal cell phone. The process allowed me to create a context for the experiences described in my autoethnographic essays.

Documents. Although autoethnography focuses on the self, it is essential to supply data from external sources to provide additional context through self-reflective data (Chang, 2008). Documents such as personal journals, emails, digital notes, calendar events, texts, letters, or pictures can be useful to qualitative researchers as they are often ready-made sources of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, personal documents can offer a glimpse into an individual's thoughts and perspectives through their own words (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These documents provide an opportunity to learn more about a person's attitudes, beliefs, and world views.

During the spring of 2019, I began to collect artifacts, documentation, and evidence of various interactions in response to a significant event I experienced as an elementary school principal. I was asked to present artifacts and evidence to help me defend myself against claims made about my leadership. The exercise required me to pore over eight months of personal notes, emails, digital notes, calendar events, texts, and letters—the results of which I placed into a two-inch three-ring binder. Over the 2019–2020 school year, I went back through the same

documents, but this time, I went back to the spring of 2018 through the summer of 2019 in greater detail to document as many critical events as I could find and remember. The evidence from my memory and the collection of documents provided the data I needed to write my essays.

Essays. Using the method of writing from more distant memories, I created chronological autoethnographic essays by putting specific events in my life into writing (Ellis, 2004). I used my memory and documents as data points and wrote my autoethnographic essays to capture events from May 2018 through June 2019. At the time, I was reading *White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (Feagin, 2013). Feagin's (2013) research regarding racial framing was a reminder that white racial framing involves articulated values and cognitive stereotypes as well as nonlinguistic factors. Our white racial frames are formed not only from what we say is desirable or undesirable on racial matters; we are also influenced by our subconscious reactions to images and smells and our racialized emotions (Feagin, 2013). Once we deconstruct our white racial frame rooted in white supremacy and arrogance, we can reconstruct our racial identity rooted in racial humility (Feagin, 2013). I wanted Feagin's work to serve as a reminder that it was my responsibility to be as raw, detailed, unedited, emotional, and vulnerable as I could be when writing my autoethnographic essays right down to sights and sounds. I wanted to lay it all out before me, no matter how painful or embarrassing my reflections would be.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis process of this study, I used a non-traditional method of analysis. While coding data is appropriate in more interpretivist studies, I used an analytical method more aligned with my subjectivist approach. Feminist scholars in particular argue that telling one's own story is an effective means to bring analytical clarity to bind, organize, and guide inquiry,

analyze lived experiences in comparison to the lives of others, or trace conduits of power by recalling encounters had with institutions (Moss & Besio, 2019). Using writing as analysis to make meaning of this critical autoethnography serves all three above-listed purposes. Writing is not just an avenue to communicate research but the very vessel of analysis to humanize qualitative data (Dubovicki, 2019; Mitchell & Clark, 2021). When writing as analysis, the process goes beyond simply reporting data. Instead, writing contributes to and becomes part of the research method, transforming the data into a relevant human experience for readers (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Bhattacharya (2017) promoted writing as an act of discovery that is part of critically reflecting on data as part of an illuminating process to breathe life into analytical thinking. To support research that uses writing as qualitative analysis, Mitchell and Clark (2021) offered four principles to guide the data analysis process: (a) listen for earworms; (b) write stream of consciousness; (c) data have plots; and (d) interpretation is inescapable.

Mitchell and Clark (2021) described earworms as a single line of a song repeatedly playing in your mind with rhythm, emotion, inflection, and tone. For example, as I listened to quotes in my critical essays, I noticed lines or phrases that acted like a single line of a song that played over and over in my mind to the point of distraction. These earworms signaled that my subconscious was telling me to pay attention. “Data earworms can be the core of your data” (Mitchell & Clark, 2021, p. 2). As these data earworms emerged and were recognized, they informed the writing process as research in composing critical essays.

Once earworms were realized, writing critical essays emerged from stream of consciousness writing. Mitchell and Clark (2021) define stream of consciousness writing as “writing what comes to mind with no regard for cohesion or the fit of that thought with the previous thought or any sort of perfection of language...you pull no punches; you do not—DO

NOT—self-censor” (p. 3). The authors urged that the focus is to write whatever comes to mind, freely, as I would speak, while remaining rooted in my data. I relied on subconscious messages to guide me to the essence of the story, weaving in related literature, but only if it came to mind. These raw and organic thoughts that surfaced through the stream of consciousness writing laid out a plot line (Mitchell & Clark, 2021).

Mitchell and Clark (2021) stated that all data have plots. Therefore, my critical essays evolved as a story by writing in micro-segments. The authors suggest that if I pay attention to my earworms, themes will begin to emerge about the story’s plot. Once I identified the plot of my story, I mapped it out using a story structure, so that I could make meaning, interpret my data, and respond to my research questions.

Mitchell and Clark (2021) argued that interpretation is an inescapable feature of qualitative analysis. The only way meaning can be made is through interpretation (Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Palmer, 1969). Interpretation is informed by what I have learned from prior literature, the theoretical perspectives I chose to design this study, and my personal life experiences and culture (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Interpreting my raw data set to develop into critical essays was an interpretation of a constructed reality of me as the participant and reflexively as a researcher constructing reality from my research data (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). When constructing a reality from research data, Mitchell and Clark (2021) warned that layers of interpretation can be lost in the data analysis of other participants. When interpreting the data of other multiple participants, the research must impress upon the reader the participants’ emotions, tone, rhythm, and inflection (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). As the only participant in this study, the challenge was not facing the lost layers of interpretation in the data analysis of other participants. Instead, the challenge was to capture my voice’s emotion, tone, rhythm, and inflection.

As I found my voice and moved from my raw data to writing critical essays, I kept track of my writing process because every writing effort connects to previous writing (Artemeva, 2004; Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Each critical essay I composed served as a record of how my data analysis evolved into its final interpretation of my lived experiences (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). These principles guided the data analysis process and the composition of this critical autoethnographic study focused on how my white privilege contributed to white supremacy and systemic racism, the evolution of my white racial frame, and how that evolution shaped me as a leader.

Composing the Critical Autoethnography

The critical component in critical autoethnography recognizes theorizing as an ongoing process that asks about and explains the nuances of an experience. The story is the mechanism for embodying and illustrating these experiences (Holman-Jones, 2016). Gornick (2008) added that “what actually happened is only raw material; what the writer makes of what happened is all that matters” (p. 8). The focus of this final portion of the methodology section outlines the steps I took to compose this study to demonstrate how critical autoethnography can engage me and others in embodying change (Holman-Jones, 2016).

Living a Writer's Life

Surveying my life practices, I reflected upon how I have entered into and need to sustain the life of a writer by entering my writing zone. My writing zone required a deep and committed focus that demanded me to limit distractions severely and create an environment conducive to personal writing needs. Often this meant producing my writing behind the closed door of my home office or stationed in the seclusion of my backyard patio where I felt safe, with the right music, subtly and subliminally floating in the air. At the same time, the gentle scent of a candle

wafted nearby. Whether writing from a stream of consciousness aforementioned by Mitchell and Clark (2021), or writing with precision, these small efforts contributed to a level of calmness that was required to sustain the level of focus essential for the vulnerable task of writing with a sense of purpose amidst a sea of peer-reviewed articles and chapter books filled with earmarked pages and color-coded tabs stacked in strategic piles all around me.

Additionally, I carved out time to read for the sake of reading with a writer's eye. Bochner and Ellis (2016) urge writers to read as much as they write and to remain in a state of determination. Dillard (1989) illustrated that living life as a writer is mentally and physically demanding by warning that "your heart will break, your back will ache, and your mind may numb as you struggle to turn life into language" (p. 44).

To anchor myself in a high level of focus in the writing process, I engaged in the following practices as I live the life of a writer: (a) organized time, space, and energy to write; (b) surrounded myself with others who contribute to my writing life; (c) did not allow my writing to get tangled up in terminology; (d) read my work out loud to practice mindfulness and respect in my writing process; (e) accepted the necessity to edit and revise my work; (f) lived in a way that caused me to question, doubt and live with uncertainty and reflexivity to "cast a wider net of consciousness and social justice" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 118).

Finding My Voice

Each person's unique voice and written prose are equivalent to their signature (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Recognizing my privilege as a White woman composing this critical autoethnography, I searingly realize how stories, by whom, and when they are told depend on power structures, just like our economic and political worlds. A friend once shared an analogy with me about selling a used couch. If you offer a range in price of \$100 to \$200, the buyer will

only offer to pay \$100 for the couch, leaving room for negotiation. In contrast, the buyer can take or leave the offer if you offer a set price, so too, with finding my voice as a writer exploring why certain domains of knowledge are not considered valid. I took the opportunity to validate my knowledge through an embodied approach with the inherent belief that the story that emerges in my writing process is set, valid, and true (Keleş, 2022) by relying on messages sent to my subconscious and intently listening for earworm data (Mitchell & Clark, 2021).

Dramatizing

As highlighted previously, Mitchell and Clark (2018) affirmed that all data has a plot. Bochner and Ellis (2016) stated that all stories revolve around a critical event, epiphany, or dramatic experience, referred to as “dramatizing” (p. 91). The authors clarified that these critical essays would provide context, setting, framing, and texturing to the story. In academia, western epistemology tends to give space to reason over emotion, but the split between reason and emotion is not absolute (Jaggar, 1989). Dramatizing allowed me to see and present myself as the sole vulnerable subject of this type of research. To reflexively perform the autoethnographic writing and data analysis process, my critical essays were conveyed more emotionally and less logically. The purpose of researching my lived experience was to explain key events, make meaning of what happened, and reflect on how I have changed. This research revolved around critical events over the 2018–2019 school year.

Timing

All autoethnographic stories long to reckon with the past, present, or future (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Knowing my life is only finite within the temporality of life, I trusted the story would lead me somewhere, and eventually, I arrived there and recognized the point at which this story came to rest. Within the overall story, it was essential to be clear about the end point of

each essay. In the tale of selling a used couch, I knew how I wanted the story to end. I wanted the couch to be sold for the price it is worth. Likewise, determining the end point of each critical essay was imperative to let the larger story breathe and ultimately choose when to rest. When autoethnographic authors write stories, they interpret and make meaning of the experiences they lived as a process of interpretation to find the story that needs to be told, which will not only depict life, but it will also shape the life of the author reflexively (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). It was imperative for me as both the participant and researcher to engage in the deepest level of humility and vulnerability to authentically capture the emotion, tone, rhythm, and inflection of my own voice to capture the true essence of the data (Mitchell & Clark, 2021).

Structuring

To compose this autoethnographic study, I drew from my raw data set to write quickly and freely to keep myself from being censored until the revising and editing stage (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Mitchell and Clark (2021) suggested, “the storyteller is the architect and engineer who takes the raw material of experience and builds a structure to contain it that puts the parts in their right places” (p. 93). As I wrote, I placed a series of critical essays into a narrative structure designed as a part of the writing process as data analysis to provide structure, knowing that all data has a plot (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). I acknowledge that some essays were more fruitful than others, but I only knew once I wrote them and earworm data emerged. Through the critical lens of CRT and CWS, I focused on the deeper meanings of each critical essay as I construct the autoethnographic story within the structure of a selected narrative model.

Revising

The burden of the academic storyteller is to find the story in the experience and to tell the story in a way that draws in the reader and activates the reader's subjectivity, emotionality, and available frames of reference (Stone, 1997). Composing an autoethnographic study requires continual writing production, vulnerability to revisions and editing, and transformation (Ellis, 2004). To enhance the trustworthiness in the writing and editing process, I utilized a Critical Friend protocol to inform the final stages of data analysis, interpretation, and communication of results (Creswell, 2015). Conversing with others and having them read and react to your writing is beneficial in the critical inquiry writing process (Ellis, 2004). Bochner and Ellis (2016) stated the following:

Communication is the pleasure and burden of our work. Since we live in much the same world as our readers, we believe our readers should not have to struggle endlessly to understand and relate to us. Our challenge is to artfully arrange life in ways that enable readers to enter into dialogue with our lives as well as their understanding of their own. (p. 79)

Ultimately, I needed to write a coherent story, immensely revising until I could make sense of the events (Ellis, 2004). I trusted the process of listening to messages from my subconscious to pay attention to the data earworms that informed my analysis (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). However, I often felt a sense of imposter syndrome in this dissertation process. Clance and Imes (1978) asserted, specifically with women, that despite their professional and academic success, instead of recognizing and owning their achievements, they question them and perceive these accomplishments as overestimations of their true gifts and abilities. To keep me on track and grounded in the undertaking of composing this critical autoethnography, I referred to the

following responses to the question as to why such personal writing matters: “Because of the spirit ... because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen our sense of life. They feed the soul” (Lamott, 1994, p. 237).

Analytic Choices. For this study, the critical essays were not inserted into a traditional narrative structural format. Instead, the narrative format was designed as a part of the writing process as data analysis. I acknowledge that some essays were more fruitful than others, but I had to write them first to discover the best format for myself and the reader to make sense of the lived experiences brought forth through the data analysis process.

To create expressive data stories, careful planning of the narrative structure is important because the structure can affect the audience’s understanding, perception, and memory of the story (Yang et al., 2022). Verisimilitude has been advised as a criterion for judging the idea that writing should be true to reality and that textual elements such as characters, setting, images, and dialogue should be plausible, believable, lifelike, and authentic (Denzin, 1994). But Denzin (1994) goes on to argue that verisimilitude is not a guarantee of truth. Likewise, Ellis (2000) asks “Is there a sense of verisimilitude? Of course, I don’t think of that word – instead I ask, does the story ring true, is it lifelike?” (p. 275). Placing these essays into a narrative structure allowed for a meaningful evolution through the data analysis process. For this autoethnographic study, through the process of writing, I discovered a narrative structure that best supported the data collection and organization of the data in a way that addressed my research questions plausibly and authentically and made the data easier to analyze.

Creswell (2015) stated that, in addition to retelling the participant’s experiences through narration, the researcher might choose to analyze the raw data using a theoretical perspective to highlight any emerging categories or themes. For this study, the data was analyzed through two

theoretical perspectives. Once the selected essays were grouped into an appropriate narrative structure, the data for this study was analyzed through the theoretical perspectives of CRT and CWS.

Because this study was situated in a school community within one school district, data analysis occurred at the micro level of society. Related to the field of education, the micro level explores the definitions of race identities and small groups or individuals and how they interpret their lived experiences (Byng, 2013). The cognitive development of human beings does not occur in isolation, but it is in a constant process of being shaped and formed through the interaction of human beings with their environment (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Therefore, it was important to take into consideration how the research questions under investigation in this study were shaped by macro and meso structures of society (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). Although this study primarily focused on the micro level, it was important during the writing process and data analysis to consider how the micro level intersected with meso and macro processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). Through data analysis, this study sought to answer how my white racial frame evolved and shaped my leadership practice.

Trustworthiness

Ethical Considerations

Other people are always present in a story's background, even in autoethnography (Chang, 2008). Therefore, this study adhered to core tenets of social sciences research to protect identities by using pseudonyms to sustain privacy and confidentiality for individuals, the schools, the communities, and the district (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, this study sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the University of Northern Colorado.

Critical Friend Protocol

Using writing as a method of inquiry meant I had to be a critical reader of my data (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). One process that benefitted me as a lone researcher was to proactively utilize the critical friend protocol (CFP) and involve a critical friend (CF) to react to my writing as I went (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The CFP contributed to the data analysis phase, which required data exploration and visualization (Creswell, 2015). The CFP was developed in 1994 by the National School Reform Faculty at Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University for K12 teacher collaboration but has also been used in higher education studies to structure reflection (Aktekin, 2019). Costa and Kallick (1993) described a CF as a person who will:

Ask provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend....Critical friends are clear about the nature of the relationship...takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented...offer value judgment only upon the request of the learner...advocate for the success of that work. (pp. 49–50)

Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) expanded the role of the CF to include responsibly questioning the work and the wisdom presented while maintaining the trust and demonstrating empathy. The CF provided support, alternative perspectives, and protection from bias or assumptions I may have missed (Foulger, 2010).

I connected with a CF I trusted who offered a fresh perspective, provided advice, and offered constructive feedback. This person was an experienced educational leader who has also witnessed and experienced racial inequities in K-12 schools. I wanted to connect with someone who would be unafraid to challenge my thinking if there was something I got wrong within my

analysis. This person guided me to think critically about my data and analysis or identified areas where I may need to revise my data. Through a constructivist interpretation offered by Storey and Richard (2015), the CFP included the following steps through the repeated exchange of ideas and dialogue with a CF to search for shared meaning and understanding of the data presented for this study:

1. Presentation: I framed the critical essay to include the background and context.
2. Probing session: The CF asked probing questions prompted by what they heard or read in the critical essay under discussion, asking for clarification or rationale. I also asked questions for clarification.
3. Positive feedback: The CF highlighted positive elements in the critical essays.
4. Cool feedback: From their perspective, the CF reviewed issues and pointed out areas of opportunity for consideration based on evidence, judgment, insight, and analysis.

To contribute to this research project's trustworthiness and challenge any preconceived notions I may have, I partnered with a CF as part of the data analysis process. Engaging in a CFP was a crucial tool that deepened my understanding of my data and informed analytical techniques that contributed to my ability to answer my research questions authentically. To add to the trustworthiness of this study, it is valuable to transparently share pieces of the CF dialogue that took place and the realizations we were able to make because of this invaluable back and forth dialogue:

1. Stick to the research questions: Through this framing, I was able to strategically focus on my raw collection of essays and narrow down my raw data from four hundred fifty-seven pages to one hundred forty-three pages.

2. Pseudonyms: I originally aimed to only give Black, Indigenous, or Hispanic/Latine characters an actual pseudonym and reference the remaining characters by their title and position. However, just as white supremacy is an ideology that anyone can ascribe to and uphold, so too was it difficult to distinguish the characters from each other because the beliefs and actions of all the characters were so tightly intertwined. It made more sense to offer key characters their own pseudonym for clarity and continuity.
3. Humanity: Although my lived experience occurred chronologically, it became more important to weave the characters together in a way that allowed the human story to emerge more naturally.
4. Dignity: A goal throughout this project was to strike a balance between telling my story in my voice as vulnerably and honestly as I could while maintaining the dignity of the characters within the story. Calibrating with my CF helped keep me on course to strive for that outcome for others and myself.

Transferability

Throughout a qualitative study, the researcher must ensure that the findings and interpretations are accurate (Creswell, 2015). One of the challenges of autoethnography is presenting evidence through personal stories that are believable, relevant, and useful in their own lives (Ellis et al., 2011). For this study to succeed, other school leaders should be able to read it, reflect deeply on their own experiences, and apply the findings to their leadership (Humphreys, 2005).

There are several methods to determine whether the findings of a study are credible and trustworthy for application elsewhere. For autoethnography, one of the measures of trustworthiness is through the concept of resonance. Bochner and Ellis (2016) stated:

When a story resonates, it moves beyond itself by questioning, probing, and expressing feelings that connect lives lived apart...from the time and place of the story. These stories do not tell people precisely what to do. Rather, they take readers into one universal struggle or another that exemplifies ways of dealing with the difficulties of living a good life. (p. 237)

Autoethnography is a narrative practice that replaces the concept of truth with the concept of usefulness (Bochner, 1994). “The question is not whether autoethnographic stories convey precisely the way things actually happened, but what these stories do, what consequences they have, and to what uses they can be put” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 239). Bochner and Ellis (2016) also stated that resonance requires the author of an autoethnography to be emotionally credible, honest, and vulnerable. The writer needs to be held to a high ethical consciousness to show concern for how others are portrayed in one’s story, show concern for whom the writer becomes by telling her story and create space for the listener. The story should help the reader feel what life is like and move the reader’s heart and belly through the use of metaphors that the reader can connect with (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). By placing my research into the framework of a narrative structure and authoring the self, I opened up my story to help the reader feel (Holland et al., 2003). I distinctly recall a precise moment when an author used a vignette where the main character authored herself in such a way that I remember exactly how I felt.

While reading *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Are Middle-Class Blacks Angry? Why Should America Care?* by Cose (1993), I came across a critical incident recounted by Isabel

Wilkerson, Chicago bureau chief for the *New York Times*. She described leaving the Detroit airport and hopping on a rental car shuttle when she was swarmed by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The DEA aggressively demanded that she comply with their commands because she was suspected of carrying drugs. She quickly realized she was the only Black person on the shuttle and became embarrassed and angry that they stopped her because of her race. As they interrogated her, she tried to neutralize the power dynamic by asking questions and taking notes. “As she realized the entire bus was staring, humiliation washed over her, and she wondered whether rape could be much worse” (p. 41). I remember reading that last sentence and suddenly throwing the book to the floor as I felt my arms prickle, my eyes sting, my throat tighten, my jaw clench, and my stomach twist in a visceral response to the last eight words. As a rape survivor, the words on the page that day forced me to embody a more extensive level of empathy and wisdom regarding the impact of everyday racialized assaults experienced by Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people. As a reader, Isabel Wilkerson’s story helped me feel what life was like for her at that moment. It moved me by using a metaphor I could connect to, serving as an example of the resonance that surfaced due to the author’s emotional credibility, honesty, and vulnerability (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Through critical autoethnography, the expectation of resonance was only fulfilled through my ability to be emotionally credible, honest, and vulnerable as the author and the only unit of analysis.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) argued that autoethnography is valuable for voices left out, oppressed, or silenced. The authors also claimed that if we default to traditional ways of assessing the validity of research, we risk delegitimizing the very essence and power of autoethnography’s “capacity for self-reflexive and self-critical accounts of experience that can heal, change, validate and engage others” (p. 239). Autoethnography can create openness for

others, give value, incite meanings, and become a source of moral responsibility (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Limitations

Adams et al. (2017) stated that one limitation of autoethnography relates to the researcher's vulnerability. Their study revealed how imperative it is for the researcher to be vulnerable, thoughtful, and honest about self-disclosing things that could evoke uncomfortable emotions in others. Researchers can place too much emphasis on personal experiences without enough consideration of other people or cultures related to the research (Chang, 2008).

Another challenge to autoethnography is the limited conclusions that might be drawn from the study's findings, which revolve around the researcher's specific experiences and potential biases (Méndez, 2014). Critics of autoethnography argue that it can be either too scientific or too creative and artsy and not a legitimate form of research more closely linked to autobiography or ethnography, which are rooted in more theory and analysis (Ellis et al., 2011).

Finally, by focusing on the perspective of a White cisgender female elementary school administrator, the research may re-center whiteness. The author bell hooks (1992) explained how re-centering whiteness could occur when attempting to disrupt whiteness:

Often the White women who are busy publishing papers and books on 'unlearning racism' remain patronizing and condescending when their discourse is aimed solely in the direction of a White audience and the focus solely on changing attitudes rather than addressing racism in a historical and political context. They make us the 'object' of their privileged discourse on race. As 'objects', we remain unequals, inferiors. Even though they may be sincerely concerned about racism, their methodology suggests they are not yet free of the type of paternalism endemic to white supremacist ideology. Some of these

women place themselves in the position of ‘authorities’ who must mediate communication between racist White women (naturally they see themselves as having come to terms with their racism). (p. 13)

Therefore, to minimize research that re-centers whiteness, it is imperative that the researcher approaches critical autoethnography with a white racial frame rooted in humility and vulnerability. As a White woman, I can never separate myself from my own white racial identity, but I attempted to approach researching myself with honesty, racial humility, and vulnerability.

Summary

This study aimed to explore how my white racial frame evolution shaped my leadership practices. This study also investigated how my white privilege fostered whiteness, contributing to racism and institutionalized oppression. In this chapter, I outlined this critical autoethnography’s methodology and research design. Detailed and descriptive information was given regarding the definition of autoethnography, definition of critical autoethnography, rationale for this study, participant and researcher positionality, data collection and analysis, limitations, trustworthiness, and the composition of this study. Overall, this study fills a small the gap in critical autoethnographic research informed by CRT and CWS. Findings contribute to the knowledge of school leadership practices seeking to dismantle systems of oppression through personal reflection rooted in honesty, vulnerability, and humility. “Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie, 2009, p. 6).

CHAPTER IV DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The following critical essays serve to illustrate the experiences I encountered during the 2018-2019 school year. These stories demonstrate the complexities of white supremacy in education from four different viewpoints. Once the critical essays were developed, CRT and CWS informed the reflexive data analysis process. Pseudonyms were used throughout for all people and schools.

Critical Essays

School Year 2015-2016

Crystal

During the Fall of 2018, I began my second principalship in a district I had served in multiple roles for over twenty years. As I began this new assignment at Brookside Elementary, I reflected on pivotal moments that led me to begin a personal growth journey to understand my white racial frame with more depth and vulnerability. As a result, I wanted to be very intentional in my leadership as a White female principal, that no matter the setting, whether personal or professional, my actions should remain consistent with my core values to resist being complicit with systemic racism in the school district, and to insist on dignity for others. One such pivotal moment took place in 2015-2016 when I was in my fifth year as principal at Sycamore Elementary.

During my fifth year as principal at Sycamore Elementary, I was thrilled that my school was one of about eleven to receive staffing to add an assistant principal! I was part of an interview committee with staff from my school, a parent from our school community, and district directors who helped facilitate the interview process.

A few days later, the announcements were posted for the new assistant principals. I was astonished and elated that the candidate I felt was best for our students and to help move our staff forward was selected for our building! This year was going to be a fabulous partnership with my new colleague, Crystal! Had I known then what I know now about the depth of internalized racism on that staff at Sycamore, I wonder if I would have done things differently, knowing that Crystal identified as a Black woman. I was excited about the possibilities of where Crystal and I could lead our staff over the school year. We planned together, and we felt energized and full of hope. We had conversations about the urgency we both felt to provide leadership that would create the conditions for change that our students could wait on no longer. I was so excited to have an additional thought partner to collaborate with, knowing we had some significant changes ahead.

One of those changes was the new state teacher evaluation system. Implementing this new evaluation system influenced our partnership and the tone of our leadership. It was new for everyone, and our staff was very nervous about what the new protocol and experience would mean for them. Crystal and I wanted to get into classrooms and start to offer feedback sooner rather than later to offer transparency in the process. Not only was the system new, but the staff had never had two administrators on staff in the history of this school, so getting used to receiving feedback from a shared leadership team was also new for everyone. As the first trimester got underway, I had a handful of teachers who would stop in my office and ask a

question or two about Crystal, feeling leery about the evaluation process or student disciplinary approaches. How long has Crystal been in administration? Where has she worked before Sycamore? Is she going to be supportive of me and my challenging students? What's her stance on student discipline? Is she going to be supportive no matter, you know, the race of the student? Do you think she thinks I am a racist teacher? Entirely supporting my colleague's actions and core values as a school leader, I encouraged staff members to get to know her and build a relationship with her. I completely trusted Crystal and wanted them to find it in themselves to do the same.

One evening in mid-October, I arrived at my office before an evening meeting. On my otherwise barren desk, a paper copy of an email correspondence with the recipient's email information cut from the top was left for me to find. The contents summarized the intentions of our staff members to mobilize to make examples of Crystal and me by taking steps to file a class action lawsuit. They aimed to push back against implementing the new state teacher evaluation system claiming the rubric was too rigorous and would result in their lack of autonomy in the classroom. I contend they were pushing back because of the culturally responsive expectations layered throughout the evaluation tool. The email cited a specific note catcher that Crystal had been using to offer feedback during classroom visits for teachers she evaluated. The note catcher was something that she brought with her from her previous school, but the feedback she offered was no different than the short emails I would send to summarize feedback from a classroom visit of the teachers I evaluated. The only difference was that the staff seemed willing to receive feedback from a White administrator, not a Black administrator. However, in their attempt at a class action response to the new evaluation process, they lumped us together.

I immediately contacted Human Resources (HR) for guidance, and from then on, HR and our supervisor were closely involved. There were many after-work conversations Crystal and I had focused on the frustrating dichotomy we recognized. We felt the urgency to dismantle oppressive systems for our students, which pressed against the directives of our supervisor, Stephanie to schmooze and coddle the staff to improve the culture and dissipate the tension. When Crystal suggested we treat the staff to a homecooked meal, our supervisor would instead transfer one thousand dollars over for us to purchase a fancy breakfast for all staff members. I learned after the fact that our supervisor had met off-site with a group of our teachers to gain further information about our leadership, without telling Crystal and me.

Meanwhile, Stephanie gave us “Culture Cash” to sweeten the school climate. These actions were frustrating to us, and Crystal expressed her discontent that I had slowed down the pace of progress by listening to the directives we had been given rather than pushing back. She was right. I should have been maintaining the shared core value we had to keep the sense of urgency for students at the center of our decisions. I kept expressing that it was my responsibility as the school leader to protect her as my colleague to stay out in front of her at every turn. She expressed her frustration that she should not have to slow down because I had. During the year, no matter how much district-prescribed equity work I had done in the past, or that Crystal and I continued to try and advance, the students continued to face racism within the walls of Sycamore Elementary.

Prior to my leadership at Sycamore, teachers had been allowed to become accustomed to teaching with their classroom doors locked. This act of locking doors had been serving two purposes. The locked doors hid the practice of zoning mostly Black males in the classroom, relegating them to a taped off area in a secluded corner of classrooms. The second purpose was

much more blatant. Often, Black and Hispanic/Latine male and sometimes Black and Hispanic/Latine female students were sent to the hallway for minor disruptions, and the locked classroom door sent an extremely dehumanizing and humiliating message to these students, who had every right to be in their own classrooms. Crystal and I continued my established habit of leaving classroom doors locked and propped open as we left classroom. Any students shoved into the hallway either returned to their classrooms or given a haven in our offices to speak their truth with a follow up conversation with their teacher. One morning, on one of my daily rounds to classrooms, I came upon a young Black female student who had been removed from the classroom. She was slumped against the wall with her knees pulled to her chest and her face buried in her tiny arms. It took some coaxing, but she eventually came with me to my office so we could talk. Once there, something took over her little body and she proceeded to tear up my office. She tossed books on the floor, pulled on the blinds, turned chairs upside-down, and swiped everything off my desk. Not needing to prevent egress, I waited her out, silently. Eventually, she climbed up on my cleared off desk and propped herself up on her left elbow, her knees slightly bent as though she was lounging comfortably on a beach chair, and she turned to stare at me. I knew to wait and to be gentle with my own eye contact. Gradually, I began to feign being busy and asking a question here or there until she was able to take in a deep breath and exhale just as deeply. It didn't take long to figure out what had made her so angry in class, destroying the front section of her classroom as she had my office. Once the teacher had finished her direct instruction and assigned next steps to students, this little one was extremely eager to learn, except she said she couldn't see. Out of frustration, the only way she knew how to communicate was to disrupt the classroom. Rather than building rapport with the student to determine the root cause of the disruption, the teacher removed her from the class and locked the

classroom door. Curious, we walked over to the nurse's office for an impromptu eye exam. This child needed glasses. Glasses. That was all she was trying to communicate. Following a restorative conversation with her classmates and teacher and some networking with the family, this student got the eyeglasses she needed and never once expressed herself in the same way, thriving in class the remainder of the year.

Adjacent to these responses to student behavior were the adult behaviors. The traditional way of tracking students into special education and clustering students into ability groups in general education was completely predictable by race. In fact, my first year as principal, I had to take leave at Sycamore for a substantial back surgery that resulted in a lung collapse prolonging my return. Veteran teachers reformatted their own class lists so they could rid themselves of "behavior kids" by manipulating the younger and newer staff members into taking these students into their classrooms instead. The entire classroom assignment process had to be continually revamped yearly to minimize systemic racist practices that had been rooted in tradition for so long, maintained by teachers who bullied their own colleagues. But teachers were not the only ones bullied. On more than one instance, if teachers felt intimidated in any way, without my knowledge, they would take it upon themselves to request that district security be present at parent/teacher conferences. This only happened with Black fathers. Sure, district security personnel showed up, but even they would refrain from engaging these families without significant evidence that safety was in fact a concern. No one ever requested security for the three White male sex offender parents for conferences or school events. They left that duty to me.

But over the course of the year, the pressure to dehumanize students racially was not limited to the internal walls of Sycamore Elementary. The school was built in a redlined

neighborhood of single-family homes. Students who lived in apartments or townhomes either had to ride the bus to school, had to have their family members drive them into the neighborhood to access the school, or they had to walk from their apartments and townhomes through small openings in the fence line to access school property. Often, when a new family moved into the surrounding apartments or townhomes, a few willing staff members or I would guide these students through the fence line to show them the shortcut. Otherwise, map applications on cell phones or smart watches would guide our students to walk along the major roads that gated off the neighborhood leading to lost students.

On more than one occasion, older White community members would come to me to complain about our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students. Once, an elderly, retired White male Navy Seal approached me at school one day to request a meeting. He proceeded to demand that I hold an assembly to teach “all those Black and Brown kids” to walk on the neighborhood sidewalks, “like all the White kids already knew how to do” because he found it an inconvenience that our students might be walking in the road as they approached their shortcuts to reach their apartment or townhome complexes. He never once considered befriending our students, he just wanted compliance. When he got nowhere with me, he attempted to lodge his complaint with his Homeowners Association (HOA) and then our school board, to no avail.

Other community members would use our building for various activities such as sports practices. I once had to testify in court when an employee of an outside sports vendor scratched the N-word across a student hallway display showing a timeline of the Civil Rights Movement. Although I was asked to gather writing samples from our students, my gut was telling me this racial slur was not written by one of our students. I requested that our camera footage be

reviewed in detail, which revealed a White male teenager had defaced our school's property. So yes, Crystal was right. Our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students, all our students, needed us to stand firm in our integrity and be courageous leaders.

Eventually our year was coming to an end, and that included finalizing evaluations for all staff, including Crystal. The decision had already been made to reassign her to a new school. As a result, the HR director, Monica, and my supervisor, Stephanie, both White females, gave me unsolicited feedback on the language that should be included in Crystal's evaluation. I did not push back. I accepted what I was asked to do. I think part of me was afraid to push back. But if I am being completely honest, I think part of me began to wonder if Monica and Stephanie were right in their assessment of Crystal's leadership abilities. When Crystal's new boss, Malita, a Latina principal, reached out to ask me what she was "getting into with her new colleague," I regurgitated the same phlegm I wrote in the evaluation, specifically about her lack of ability to build relationships with all stakeholders, and her lack of ability to help lead the school in a way that fostered a healthy culture and climate.

When I met with Crystal to review her final evaluation, she had already assessed the content. I tried to ease into a conversation with this person I had since lost as a colleague, a partner, and a friend. I opened the conversation as gently as possible, asking what she might want to discuss or ask. Because I wrote them down, her exact words were, "Chris, I reflected on what I would say in this conversation with you today. Ultimately, I decided the best thing I could do was say nothing." What an ass I was. I knew better, but I had not acted with integrity. I violated Crystal's dignity.

We didn't speak again for three years until Crystal and I had a short phone interaction. She stated that I had crossed her mind more recently. She asked if I would be willing to meet

with her to catch up and talk briefly. We met at a mutually agreed upon spot. We greeted each other and sat near the front door of a coffee shop. We first lightly caught up on the lives of our families and how it was going in our current leadership roles. Eventually, with a slight pause in the conversation, the dialogue shifted to our purpose for meeting that morning. My responsibility was to listen. Listen carefully. Listen actively. Listen with humility. She took us back in time, and without really rehashing any specifics, she shared the journey she had been on as a person over the last three years. Crystal expressed that in the past, she would put people in one of two categories: hero or villain. She shared that years before we were administrative colleagues, when we worked together in a different capacity, she had never heard a White leader speak so openly about race, show a willingness to do courageous work, and commit to breaking down oppressive systems and structures that held back our students. Crystal said she had seen me as a hero. When it was announced that she would join me as an administrative colleague, she assumed we would pick up where we left off and continue as partners to tackle issues of race head-on as a leadership team. However, that is different from how our time together played out. I was not courageous. I failed. She made it clear that the actions I took three years earlier, and the ones I did not take, had placed me squarely in the category of a villain in her life. When this happened, she essentially wrote off that person. Her position on heroes and villains had since changed. She realized it was more complex than placing humans into one of two categories. People are always on a journey. She felt she recognized that I was on such a journey. She offered me a significant amount of grace in that moment. I could feel an emotional punch deep in my stomach. I thanked Crystal for sharing her perspective with me. I shared that I was there to listen to her or answer her questions. She paused, but she did have one question to ask of me: "How much responsibility do you take for what happened?" My response might have poured out of me too quickly, but

looking her straight in the eyes, I answered, “I take one hundred percent responsibility for what happened.” Crystal held my gaze with the most subtle nod of her head. I do not know if she even needed or wanted my apology. I apologized for my actions that caused her pain and, probably more importantly, the actions I did not take that caused her to feel dehumanized and humiliated. I did not sustain her dignity as a fellow human being.

Three years earlier, I had listened to what Stephanie told me to do and Malita seemed to accept what I had told her about Crystal. I offered, for what it was worth, that I had since been on a journey of self-reflection and mentorship to equip myself better to stand more firmly in my integrity to cause less harm as a White leader, colleague, friend, wife, and mother. If faced with a similar circumstance again, I hoped to be a person who would recognize racial trauma and respond differently going forward, seeking to sustain the dignity of others, even if there was a cost to me. She responded that she appreciated the sentiment and wanted to watch and see what happened over time. Our conversation dwindled to a place of, not closure, but a closing for the time being. We stood up and thanked each other for the conversation we were able to have; we hugged, and we departed.

Analysis

Kohli et al. (2017) argued that it is imperative to research the everyday, normalized acts of racism (Holt, 1995; Kohli et al., 2017). In education, these everyday micro events are demonstrated in the practices of teachers and administrators and expose internalized manifestations of institutionalized racism (Holt, 1995). For example, you sometimes hear a White person say, “I cannot be racist. I have a Black partner, wife, husband, friend, or child.” Yet, this critical essay illustrates that anyone can bolster white supremacy whether they realize it or not. In this situation, I should have exposed the school staff to demonstrate their racially

motivated resistance to Crystal. However, I did not expose anything. I did not speak up about her strengths as a leader. I did not fight for her during the evaluation process. Kohli et al., (2017) argued that silence associated with an awareness of racism centers whiteness instead of disrupting institutional racism. CRT holds that race neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and the myth of meritocracy are claims that must be challenged, disrupted, and dismantled (Matsuda et al., 1993). My actions related to Crystal's evaluation punctuate the idea that I was ascribing to the myth of meritocracy related to Crystal's leadership abilities rather than disrupting that myth. CRT also insists on relying on the voices and knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society (Matsuda et al., 1993). When Malita, a Latina principal seemed to accept my assessment of Crystal's leadership weaknesses rather than push back at me to highlight any strengths she may have as a leader, she also fell into the trap of the myth of meritocracy. However, CRT aspires to eliminate racial oppression as part of the broader focus toward ending all forms of inequity, and CRT further argues that for those working alongside and with marginalized groups, CRT scholars must reject internalized white supremacy and exercise humility (Matsuda, 1987; Matsuda et al., 1993). I failed to disrupt racial oppression related to Crystal's leadership capabilities.

Through the lens of CWS, Toure and Dorsey (2018) argued that through their silence, school leaders leave the dominant frame of white supremacy unchallenged. White supremacy works to divide and disconnect White people from racially minoritized people, disconnect White people from each other, and divide us from ourselves. I contend that when I did not speak up regarding Crystal's strengths in her evaluation, I was distancing myself from her, which, consciously or unconsciously, was an act rooted in racial arrogance. White materiality points to the body's importance in exploring how race works within social contexts to demonstrate the

inherent advantages of whiteness (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021). Fanon (2008) defines this as “a pattern of behavior, a set of capabilities and constraints dividing people based on their skin color into two separate worlds” (p. 92). When I told Crystal I needed to stay out in front of her to protect her, I was physically separating myself from her, which resulted in me oppressing her during a routine evaluation process for school administrators. This is a clear example of Feagin’s (2013) position that “for the most part, large-scale systems of oppression are not carried out by wild-eyed extremists with major psychological disorders, but by ordinary people in daily routines” (p. 141).

Feagin (2013) also argued that only individuals who self-reflect on their White racial frame are prepared to disrupt white supremacy. Within my white racial frame, I lacked the knowledge at this stage. My lack of knowledge limited my ability to interrogate systemic racism and support Crystal (Waite & Ehrich, 2022). I had not yet engaged in this level of reflection. I needed to commit to my own emotional and intellectual work around race so as a White woman, I was equipped to push back against the “contractual obligations to uphold white supremacy” (Shah et al., 2022, p. 461). Burns (2019) highlighted that school leaders must first engage in their racial identity development because they can only lead what they understand. Without an anchor in the framework of CRT and CWS, racial identity development can foster further racism (Feagin, 2013).

My experience with Crystal represents how I acted as a token for the district and fostered further racism, which responds to my first research question: How did my white privilege foster whiteness and contribute to white supremacy and systemic racism? This essay illustrates at least one example of my contribution to white supremacy and systemic racism. Without an anchor in the framework of CWS, my racial identity development fostered further racism (Feagin, 2013).

This experience gave me a better capacity for and commitment toward actively recognizing racial trauma. It required me to begin assessing whether I was contributing to recognized racial trauma or confronting it.

I knew I needed to engage in intense self-reflection and further learning to continue developing my white racial frame to make the invisible norm of whiteness visible to myself and others (Applebaum, 2016). I would continue to engage in deep self-reflection to engage in the process of dismantling and rebuilding my white racial frame to comprehend the complexities of my white racial identity, to awaken to my complicity in a system rooted in white supremacy, and to learn how to fight against systems of oppression (Jupp et al., 2016). I wanted to prepare myself to do more than be able to identify and recognize the impact of white supremacy in this district. I needed to be equipped with the skill, will, knowledge, and capacity to act, and that moment presented itself two years later with my colleague Jocelyn. When she approached me about the trauma she was experiencing at the hands of her teammates, I was ready to act.

September 2018 to February 2019

Jocelyn

Over the last twenty years in this district, I had attended equity meetings designed for parents as a parent, classroom teacher, and administrator. I had also repeatedly attended district training focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion over the years, first as a classroom teacher, then as an assistant principal, and finally as a principal. I did not know any better at the time, and I was fully invested in what the district had to offer for personal growth. I had a Black son at home and young Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine, and other marginalized students in my classrooms. Furthermore, I wanted to do what I thought was best for them and incorporate what I was being taught in professional development to be best for them.

As an assistant principal, when I could mobilize over forty Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine families to partner with our school, I was told by the White male principal I was partnered with at the time that this was good leadership. He only said that because the outreach I conducted made him look good. He just swooped in and joined the meetings once the trust and relationship building were in motion, a continual work in progress. A dynamic that began to unfold with him was that he began sending every disgruntled Black parent to me. Only afterwards did I learn from a few Black moms that the White male principal told them, “You should go talk to Chris. She can relate to what you are going through.” Are you serious? I was mortified. How should I engage in relationships with these moms when they think this is my perspective? Mortified. Like White people who claim they are not racist because of their adjacency to Blackness, so too can White people assume that just because you have Black friends, or you are in a relationship with a Black person, you somehow have full agency to understanding the Black experience, which is dangerously shortsighted. Thank goodness these moms trusted me enough to work through not only that ugly comment and assumption but also to partner for the sake of their child.

In recent years, I attended diversity, equity, and inclusion district training with two women I knew more closely than others. The first female colleague expressed feeling traumatized sitting in a learning space that seemed focused on teaching White folks about their whiteness at the expense of the comfort of the White educators in the room. An exercise was assigned to each table to develop some typical behaviors, cultural norms, or attitudes of White people. I will never unhear a response vocalized from a table in the back of the room that day. Their summary statement was, “Whiteness is like a martini like Blackness is a forty-ounce.” I was shocked. A lot of us were shocked. However, it went unchecked by the facilitators.

Following that experience, I continued attending with a few staff members. One of those staff members was Jocelyn, who was new in Colorado, new to this district in the role of a special service provider at Sycamore Elementary, and new to this training experience. She asked me for some context, but I did not want to influence her experience in any way. As a woman who identifies as Puerto Rican, she was also significantly taken aback and traumatized by the experience. Jocelyn wanted to set up a conversation with the female coordinators, one a Black female, the other White. I shared with my supervisor, Stephanie, what our plan was. One must always share what their plan was with one's supervisor. The essence of the conversation was Jocelyn expressing how the experience made her feel dehumanized, with the two coordinators listening yet trying to convince her that was not how she felt, or it was not their intention, or it was just a price to pay to advance the cause of educating White educators. At the time, I did not have the specific language I needed to help weigh in alongside Jocelyn. I knew anyone could ascribe to the tenets of upholding white supremacy. White people had a vested interest in doing so. Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized individuals could be tokenized into the same. I knew race was a social construct. White supremacy was not a skin color but an ideology. I knew we were playing into racial essentialism, which was dangerous and lacked dignity for all participants.

The more I learned personally through continued mentorship, the more my core values directly conflicted with my responsibilities as a building leader in a district with different priorities. Shortly after being named as the principal at Brookside Elementary, I needed to complete several new hires over the Summer of 2018, including one special service provider. Jocelyn and I had worked together in a previous school. Usually, if district employees wanted a change, they put in for a transfer, and a placement can be made with district-level input and

approval. I wrote lengthy emails to the entire staff to offer transparency, clarity on policy, and my philosophy on the hiring process for all the candidates I needed to hire.

We had already interviewed several other candidates for this position without success, so when Jocelyn approached me and shared that she had been reflecting on putting in for a transfer, I welcomed the idea! She had the heart, knowledge, and skill set we needed, and we had a good working relationship. It was best that she applied as a transfer but participated in an actual interview with the committee for transparency and to foster shared decision-making. The hiring committee embraced her during the interview process and seemed very excited to have her join us.

It was not long before Jocelyn began to have some initial reflections about the distrust that was beginning to develop between her and the team. She identified as the only Latina on staff, along with two other staff members who identified as Black. The rest of the staff was White. Her instinct was that the differences of opinion between her and other team members regarding how to meet the needs of our students were rooted in racial undertones. At this point, she wanted to give things some more time, continue focusing on relationships, and, if needed, speak one-on-one with colleagues.

Multiple service providers had expressed concern about needing to be updated in practice and research since their previous principal had been minimally involved in special services for students. However, as one veteran team member, Barb began to discover that we were unearthing some ancient and inappropriate practices related to her approach to student service plans, she expressed having anxiety and paranoia ever since the departure of the one principal, who many years ago, had overly praised her practices and program design for years. It was as if she felt she could do no wrong and was untouchable. Previous leaders had tried to address the

misjudgments in her programming but had never gotten very far. We set up multiple meetings to discuss specific student learning plans and the practices and processes currently followed by the team to better calibrate their work with district expectations and state law.

The first six weeks of school were met with some intense student behaviors from general and special education students. We had students who were hitting, kicking, spitting, and running. With my background and experience with a Behavior Development program for seven years, I was familiar with recognizing and working through significant student behaviors. These students were communicating a need, and it was up to us as adults to respond. The time that may have been spent building relationships with students, staff, and parents in the community was spent responding to repeated moments of student crisis for a long time. I was a more hands-on administrator when it came to supporting students in crisis, as were a few members of our special services team. My style was met with mixed reviews from the staff. Some were elated by our team's response. Others expected us to suspend these students quickly, as previous principals had done.

By the end of September, members of the special services team and I continued to respond to students in crisis while also trying to gain an understanding of this school's historical approach to response to intervention, often learning about these practices during student evaluations for services and service plan review meetings. As we moved through this vital work, several Individual Education Plans (IEPs) had more than one concerning flaw. I shared my initial concerns with district leadership in August, with ongoing dialogue with several directors.

As Jocelyn began to respond to student needs and inform staff and parents about her service model and philosophy, her caseload ballooned. What did not balloon was the staff's capacity to understand and trust how Jocelyn's services should be delivered. When policy and

best practices were presented about what our students needed, I could feel the permanence of tradition in their eyes. Embarrassed by their ignorance or resistance, they were ready to dehumanize anyone who clarified policy with them or offered a different perspective. Jocelyn was asking for basic human dignity for our students.

This is when things started to shift. The veteran team member, Barb began counting service minutes, coaching parents on what to say, and gossiping about Jocelyn with staff and community members. She only advocated for student services support for the White students and families she adored, demonstrating a clear pattern that Barb was at the helm of marginalizing any student who was not White.

The staff was not zeroing in on the underperformance of White special service providers the way they were with Jocelyn's focus on student dignity. As students of color needed support, they often requested time with her or would only respond to her. As a result, Jocelyn was starting to feel racial tension with the rest of the White team members. She approached me to talk privately to share how she was feeling.

Temperaments had drastically shifted on the special services team ever since the Barb was directly approached by district leadership that she needed to stop her unethical practices when a director firmly stated, "You knew this," meaning Barb understood she had been told multiple times to end unethical cross-programming or using questionable data to identify students for special services programming. She had a very co-dependent relationship with her students that served her white savior mentality to over-identify students of color with special needs to satisfy her deep desire to be needed as an educator. The reprimand from the special education director created a split on the team, with Barb and her allies conspiring with the staff and community members to challenge Jocelyn at every meeting. Jocelyn was clear about her

core values and recognized that, at some point, things might lead to a pointed conversation. She knew her worth. She knew her brilliance. She also predicted to me that her skill set was going to be challenged and brought into question. I believed her. As best I could, I wanted to reassure her that based on previous learning experiences, I had every intention to stand by her side, defend her worth, and give her the space she needed to speak her truth.

One afternoon in Fall of 2018, the special services team was scheduled to meet with district leadership again to calibrate our current practices toward district expectations and state law. The day before, Barb discreetly moved up one of her student meetings so neither administration nor key service providers would be present. Jocelyn, her special services partner, and I discovered the meeting and joined while it was already in progress. Before our arrival, it was already determined what the student's service model would be, which was not only undignified for the student, but it was not based on data. Following this meeting, Jocelyn's special service provider partner drafted an email to clarify eight points of concern related to the process that took place with this student. District leadership also weighed in regarding practices rooted in compliance and defensibility. Unbothered, Barb kept orchestrating discreet movements that excluded or set up specific teammates, widening the rift between colleagues, just like she did at our next meeting. We all gathered as a team in the conference room to participate in each step of the eligibility determination process for special services for a specific student. Parents, all special service providers, and the general education teacher were in attendance. Generally, the case manager for the student would initiate introductions of the parents and facilitate the meeting flow using an agenda to which all team members had access. Often, the agenda was projected on a screen, and possibly a hard copy was provided. Barb, who in this instance was serving as the case manager, was the person who had been discreetly networking with critical parents in the

community to prod her professional agenda to sustain outdated programming while sowing seeds of doubt about how Jocelyn's service minutes were being delivered to students.

Today, Barb began with introductions of each parent and each team member at the table. Then, she suddenly pivoted off script. Because the special education director had recently demanded that she end unethical use of questionable data to identify students for special services programming, she needed a way to get out of this situation while trying to maintain her relationship with the child's mother, no matter the cost to her colleagues. For the past several years, Barb had manipulated the mother into believing her child needed an IEP. In the role of case manager, Barb turned to the parents and began a short monologue celebrating the student's progress and growth and how much the team loved this student. She then told the parents that because of such progress, the student would no longer qualify for an IEP and stated in front of everyone at the table that instead, we would set the student up with a 504 Plan for support. She turned to Jocelyn as though she should take over the meeting by passive-aggressively chirping, "Go ahead, Jocelyn! The floor is yours!"

Are you kidding me? An IEP eligibility determination meeting requires meaningful participation from all team members, parents included, and is a separate eligibility determination process from that of a 504 Plan focused on student accommodations and access to learning, and Barb knew it. Any pre-determination of a disability, which is what Barb was doing, is unlawful. Jocelyn had just been very awkwardly set up to provide 504 Plan accommodations and services when eligibility had yet to be determined, so she sought to maintain her composure, as did I. There was a slight but noticeable pause in the room. Several things were happening here. In the capacity of case manager, Barb had singlehandedly determined that the student did not qualify for an IEP, but in doing so, she was also promising the parents that the student would qualify for

a 504 Plan, which was a second act of unlawfully predetermining eligibility. This move also positioned Jocelyn, the only team member of color, against an interracial couple. The rest of the team sat there, bewildered but willing to go with the Barb's statement. This behavior put me in a legal position to intervene to secure the rights of the student and sustain the student's dignity while trying not to alienate the parents or the team members in the room. Delicacy, decorum, empathy, humility, knowledge, and professionalism are integral to inform the next steps the building administrator or any team member versed in special education law might take.

Sometimes, when a faux pas occurs in a team process like this, a fellow team member might graciously and gently step in and help the conversation round the corner to get back on track. However, this was egregious. Not only was the eligibility process not followed legally, but the case manager also sought to humiliate Jocelyn. This was not the first time that Barb knew that what she was doing was unlawful while also recognizing that the family did not understand special education law. Through the eyes of the parents, this would make Jocelyn appear resistant to providing services for this student when everyone at the table, but the parents recognized there was no way for Jocelyn to legally proceed with a 504 Plan eligibility determination process at this meeting. I felt again that I was walking on eggshells while addressing to the IEP team what Barb had just done wrong related to their child's education rights and what she had just done to Jocelyn.

In recent weeks, the father who had basically been excluded from these eligibility determination meetings for his child, had built up trust with me. While his wife wanted IEP protections for their child, he had expressed that he felt very secure in the fact that his child was a solid student who did not need the legal protection of an IEP to be successful. He believed it was up to the school system to provide reasonable differentiated instruction for all students,

including his quirky child whom he felt could reasonably benefit from general education alone. Jocelyn and I had been able to help him feel welcomed into the building and, therefore, into this process with his child where his voice was finally being heard. I turned to Jocelyn, and when our eyes locked, there was a trust there for me to ask the team if we could pause a second and ask the parents if they had any questions. The mother implicitly trusted the case manager and trusted what was proposed and wanted to quickly move into developing a 504 Plan immediately, skipping over any eligibility determination process, desperate to sustain legal protections for her child. At that moment, it felt like an outside conversation had occurred between the mother and the case manager. I found out later that this was accurate.

I turned to the father and asked him if he had any questions. He wanted us to distinguish between an IEP and 504 Plan and the process for each. Once we broke down the difference between the two plans, it was evident to the father that we first needed to follow and complete the legal steps of eligibility determination for the IEP. The fact that I asked the father if he had questions was enough to infuriate Barb. Her neck had turned beet red during this conversation, and she significantly minimized her contribution to the conversation, just enough to finish the eligibility determination process. The student did not qualify for special education, and I had real concerns about the fallout from this meeting.

I knew Jocelyn would want to talk with me about what happened. She and I met after school that day. I believe we had a trusting work relationship. We had deep conversations over the last two years, ranging from parenting to music to racism to food. I knew I needed to listen and that whatever she needed, I would make happen, no matter the cost. We talked through how she felt. I hope I gave her a safe place to vent and ask for what she needed. She did not ask for any steps to be taken at this point. She needed time to process. The following day, she came in

and reached out to me and expressed feeling physically ill about being at work, considering what occurred the previous day. I was adamant that she had every right to leave. Self-care came first.

At the beginning of the year, one family came forward expressing concerns about special services for their child. They either did not understand their rights or were given incorrect information from a special service provider no longer employed at the school. Either way, they were not trusting of the team or the evaluation process, and at the end of the process, the student did not qualify. The parents did want their child to still have access to one support service through Jocelyn but wanted to control the service delivery. They began to demand that Jocelyn come in before contract hours to meet. Because Jocelyn was not required to do so, the parents' relationship began to deteriorate to the point that they flat-out questioned her credentials and her ability to deliver services. This approach became a pattern with other parents as well. At this point, Jocelyn asked to meet with me about how to proceed with her team and this group of families.

Jocelyn shared openly with me how this deeply impacted her as a Latina and how this treatment of her was rooted in racism. She intended to speak to the team about her feelings of being targeted as the only woman of color on the team. When she reached out to her department supervisor to let him know what was happening, she was told that she just needed to let her team know that she was Puerto Rican, which should diminish the team's tension. According to her department supervisor, that would solve the issue and put an end to the racial mobbing Jocelyn was receiving from the team and the community. Jocelyn felt utterly unsupported by his response.

Whether I could stand behind her or not, she assured me she felt fully capable of addressing her colleagues. I gave her my word that she had my full support and asked her what

she needed my role to be. The plan was set for Jocelyn to address the team the following week. She wanted me to be present, but she wanted to address her colleagues directly at the next team meeting. I would take my cues from her and speak up when and how I was needed to sustain her dignity in the conversation.

In January 2019, all elementary administrators attended our monthly leadership meeting hosted by our elementary-level directors. Once our full-day meeting wrapped up for the weekend, my director Malita and I left the larger meeting space to sit in the hallway in the two available chairs. We sat next to each other. I don't know why I distinctly remember Malita wearing bright yellow that day. When you talk to Malita, she will start by asking you to refresh her thinking about the incident under discussion. Every single time. Once she could recall our previous conversation, she would briskly add, "Oh yeah! Now, I remember! Go ahead..." That's how the conversation began. Once I felt confident that she recalled all the moving parts and players, I filled her in on the latest events in my school community, specifically on the recent concern of a parent.

We then discussed what happened between two service providers on the same special education team during the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting the day prior, which involved this same parent. I wanted to walk Malita through what I felt needed to happen next to support Jocelyn, one of those team members. In my previous principalship, I was able to partner with an assistant principal. I explained to Malita how—back when Crystal was an assistant principal with me—I had been complicit with the district's demands in ways I did not want to repeat. Both Crystal and Jocelyn were women of color. I wish I had supported Crystal more than I had, and I felt similar dynamics were surfacing with Jocelyn. I wanted my response to be different this time.

I felt a small groundswell developing with a select group of staff members and a group of White moms of students who had a dual interest in maintaining local power as parent teacher community organization members and as parents of students with IEPs. These moms historically held influential decision-making power within the school and in the community, in the absence of equitable and visible school leadership from the preceding elementary school principal. I needed to be clear about my intentions as a building leader to support the dignity of my students of color and staff members of color, like Jocelyn. I shared that Jocelyn was experiencing racialized mobbing by staff and school community members. I would be vocal in my support of her. I wanted Jocelyn to have a safe space to speak her truth regarding her racialized experiences as a staff member and to give voice to how we needed to put the needs of all our students first in decision-making processes. I planned to support Jocelyn in the upcoming meeting in which she planned to address her colleagues. I would not be silent this time around. I remember looking Malita directly in the eye, and saying, “There will come a time that you will abandon my leadership and me, and you protect the school district’s brand.”

Malita’s upper body arched back, her hand came to her chest, her mouth dropped open, and out came this kind of two-note nervous laugh of a sound that represented both a gasp and a smile. Taken aback, she responded, “Oh my God, Chris! That would never happen!” She tried to assure me things would be fine, that she believed in me, and that I would feel her support. She even said, “Maybe I’m just a Pollyanna, but I believe things will be okay.” I listened to the words coming out of her mouth, but I felt she had no idea how to handle what could happen next. I let her know that time would tell. She asked a bit about my Mom’s Alzheimer’s journey, and we told each other to have a good weekend. She hugged me, and we parted ways.

Later that afternoon, our former supervisor, Stephanie reached out to a small group of us via text to get feedback on a topic that was covered during our day-long elementary administrator's meeting. I responded to the text strand and then privately sent her a text to let her know I had had a challenging conversation with Malita and that she should probably hear from me. I had nothing to hide, and my intuition was guiding me. She asked me to tell her a good time to speak, but she called me immediately. So, I filled her in. She agreed that Malita might not be fully in tune with my concerns and would find her way into a conversation with Malita to guide her from her end. Even today, I have no idea if Malita or my former supervisor, Stephanie ever intended their responses to these quiet conversations to support my leadership or for their personal gain. All I knew was that Malita would not be ready if things escalated further. They did.

Back at Brookside a few days later, the special services team met in a room where we always held our team meetings. It was a tight space but still allowed us to see each other in a circle around a rectangle of desks and tables placed together. Before we moved into the agenda, Jocelyn shared that she wanted to address something with the team. She expressed to her team that it had been brought to her attention by community members and her colleagues that her credibility was being questioned by families of some of these more complex cases we were facing. The team took this in, agreeing there were some tough cases in play, but a few vocalized that they were surprised at the notion that Jocelyn's credentials had been questioned. She spoke calmly and with purpose and integrity. She wanted to let the team know that she had been made aware of the narrative being created about her. One or two team members strongly rebutted that they were not a part of such conversations. The rest of the team sat in awkward silence, not wanting to make eye contact, and not wanting to be involved in a conversation they knew was

not meant for them. It was unspoken knowledge that the one person in the room responsible for this was sitting in silence, making zero eye contact with anyone as the skin on her neck blazed bright red. Jocelyn wanted to let them know that they could come directly to her if her teammates had any questions or doubts about her service. She was open, approachable, and always willing to receive feedback, clarify, collaborate, and partner in the best interest of the students they served. When she expressed this sentiment, one of the teammates interjected, “Wow, Jocelyn, you seem really angry right now and...” Another teammate took it upon themselves to cut off this interjecting peer respectfully but quickly and come to the defense of Jocelyn. Jocelyn did not appear to be coming off as mad or upset. It was unfair to make this assumption about how she was feeling. The interjector responded with a nervous giggle, “Wait, I didn’t mean anything by that. I mean, she seems upset by what’s happening. I don’t think what I said was offensive.”

I took a deep breath in but paused. Jocelyn was glad that a peer had addressed the interjector, but now the interjector was getting defensive. I knew Jocelyn was frustrated, but she did not show it. I kept my voice out of the space until Jocelyn gave me the look. I turned to the interjector and addressed her comment. I said, “What’s happening here is we have shifted from active listening to projecting onto Jocelyn what we think her emotional state is right now. You are calling her angry. This language perpetuates a stereotype that anytime a woman of color expresses her truth, they are now the ‘Angry Puerto Rican Woman’ as in this case. What we are not going to do is that. We will not project onto Jocelyn what we think she’s feeling, but rather, we will hear her out with dignity and respect. She has a valid concern, and we need to hear her out. I expect the same from anyone on this team or our staff.”

Jocelyn picked up the conversation, leading her to her point that she felt that what was happening to her was racially motivated and did not feel great. At all. Most of the team’s body

language was mainly of shock, having not known. If Barb could have slinked out of the room on the tips of her toes, she would have. None of them knew what to do with the feedback from Jocelyn except the one teammate who came to her defense. Afterward, Jocelyn and I had a private conversation. I told her I had spoken to my supervisor, Malita and the special education director and tried to reassure her that I would stand by her side. I was relieved she had spoken her truth. I shared with Jocelyn that I experienced a critical incident years earlier when I knew I should have spoken up, but I didn't. Upon reflection, I wanted to do what I could to minimize the possibility that I would put myself or others in the same position again. I cannot ever divorce myself from my whiteness, but I can carry myself with a better purpose and action to be better equipped not to cause you further harm. I would witness and believe her truth and use my voice as an accomplice, not for her but alongside Jocelyn.

Analysis

White supremacy refers to how the ruling class elite used the socially constructed concept of race to create whiteness and a racialized hierarchy and political system to define who is seen as fully human and who is not (Okun, 2021). It is still the driving force undergirding all systemic harm toward Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine people across all aspects of our society, including education (Okun, 2021). Knowing that CRT holds that race is socially constructed and has no biological or genetic basis, I contend that Jocelyn was treated the way she was because her teammates were using a socially constructed concept of race to define who they saw as fully human or not (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These White women did not see Jocelyn as fully human, making it justifiable to question her integrity and credentials as an educator while she was employing a tenet of CRT to use her voice and knowledge to analyze what she was experiencing as the Latina member of an otherwise all White team.

Partnering with Jocelyn represents how I had made one tiny step forward in further developing my white racial frame, which responds to my second research question: How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice? I began to understand that racism persists and is not acknowledged because it is perceived as normal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Traditional legal thinking about racism and racial oppression is from the viewpoint of the perpetrator, not the victim, because the White majority's perspective is the foundation of such discourse (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Freeman, 1978). These systems and structures of oppression exist beyond legal discourse. In this critical essay, I could now recognize that the teammate who called Jocelyn angry was analyzing the incident from her perspective as the perpetrator rather than from the viewpoint of Jocelyn, the recipient of her comment. She prioritized her comment's intent over her words' impact on Jocelyn. From this viewpoint, I would argue that no microaggressions exist. All violations of human dignity are macroaggressions. Borrowing from Bell's (1979) assertion that White people became threatened by affirmative action programs stemming from the belief of White people that Black people should never get ahead of White people, Jocelyn's teammates were threatened by her performance as an educator and her natural ability to connect with and make positive gains with marginalized students.

I could now speak to the idea that the special services team saw their whiteness as property which they used to marginalize, humiliate, and exclude Jocelyn by creating false narratives about her, questioning her credentials, stereotyping her as angry, and inciting members of the community to racially mob in her in similar ways. CRT scholars argued that the behavior of people of color has always been defined negatively and controlled by members of the dominant White group (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I could now speak about how their

behaviors reinforced CRT research that White teachers have inherent racial biases (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

White supremacy in education impacts not only the adults in the field but also students. Racist transgressions do not stop at human behaviors but extend to the curriculum students are exposed to in the learning environment. I did not know then that racialized trauma from the school curriculum was about to impact my son and our family directly. Not only was I going to need to be able to speak about the curriculum as an educator, but I was also going to need to be an advocate for my son as his mother.

August 2018 to April 2019

Tate

During my second month as principal at Brookside Elementary in 2018, a family who had contacted me several days prior contacted me again regarding a second school incident involving one of their children. I was nervous because I felt we were on good terms and wanted to sustain the relationship. Sometimes, multiple incidents, especially over a short time, can break down the relationship between a family and the school. The parents reached out about a racially insensitive incident in class. A young boy loudly blurted out for all to hear, “I hate Mexicans, but I like tacos!” The teacher did not address the comment. This family’s child was rightfully upset. He shared with his parents that he had been made fun of by another student when sharing with his peer that he was Mexican. The parents were concerned that the teacher did not have the skills to address the comment. This incident led this student’s parents to bring up a concern regarding a specific book series in many elementary school libraries, including ours at Brookside Elementary. These parents shared their criticisms of this book series and that it was well documented how the books highlighted Hispanic/Latine stereotypes and mocked the Spanish

language. Regarding the young boy's racially charged comment, the classroom teacher shared with me the curriculum resource she was using and the scripted lesson plan she felt created the condition for the comment to come forward in the classroom conversation. The parents and I discussed the conversation that needed to happen with the classroom teacher about the curriculum resource and the next steps we could take using district policy as our guide to review the book series and its purpose in our school library.

I then consulted my supervisor, Malita, as would be expected, and with her, I walked through the steps I thought I should take, both seeking her counsel and thinking aloud. I was glad this family felt comfortable enough to come to me with this concern this early in my leadership at Brookside Elementary, yet I had barely begun our equity work with the school staff. I knew this process needed to be addressed with integrity for all stakeholders involved. I also shared with my supervisor that I felt compelled to address this from a parent's perspective. I lightly described the scenario my husband and I were working through with our son, Tate and his high school experience with *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1959). Malita was curious and asked me to share more. I confided to her the conversations my husband and I had with our son's English teacher about *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Back in mid-August, all schools hosted a Back-To-School Night. I host as an administrator each year and then go to my son's school to participate as a parent. During my delivery as an administrator, I always try to keep presentations to a minimum to allow families maximum time to get to know their child's teacher—no different this year. I was relieved the staff had already shared that keeping things short and sweet would be a nice change. When I sought counsel about how Back-to-School events usually looked, I conversed with the staff to see what the community expected, what they needed from me, what they wanted to keep, and

what they would like to change. It became a joke how annoyed the staff was about how long-winded the previous principal, Chad would be when leading school events. Teachers called any community event “The Chad Show” and expressed how he would drone on commanding an audience longer than necessary. I let the staff know this was noted. I felt the attention, focus, and support should be on the staff and the community. I promised to keep things short and sweet this year. When the day arrived, I introduced myself to the parent audience. I focused on new beginnings for a bright year ahead for the students and families in the community, allowing as much time as possible for parents to network with their child’s teacher and our support staff.

I then pivoted into the role of a parent, and my husband and I attended our son’s high school Open House. We followed an abridged schedule to spend a few minutes with each of our son’s teachers for their brief overview of the course syllabus. During the presentation of my son’s English teacher, I expected the works listed for the ninth-grade class to include the play *Othello* by Shakespeare (1603), *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a text by Harper Lee (1960), and the play *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1959). There they were. The cover image of each work was on the introductory slide of the teacher’s presentation.

As the ninth-grade English teacher expressed her thoughts on these works, something began to well up inside me, and a question formed. She introduced herself and said that she had experience teaching at another high school known to be much more diverse, that “those schools” can be “really tough” on teachers, and that she was “really glad” to be back on this side of town where she had attended as a student. My husband, seated next to me, turned his head toward me and gave me a look that rhetorically asked, “What does she mean by ‘those schools’?” I knew what he was thinking. Her statement alluded to “those kids,” which, for us, as an interracial family, had strong racial overtones. As this teacher wrapped up her presentation, I noticed some

chart paper on the wall with terminology that must have been used to discuss racism, slavery, and oppression in class.

When she asked if any parents had any questions, the feeling I had was still in my gut, so I raised my hand and asked, “Can you share with us a little bit about your philosophical approach to exploring the content in books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* so that Black and Indigenous and other marginalized student groups are not dehumanized, and White students are not left with racialized terms or slurs to use in the hallways once class is dismissed?” Suddenly, all eyes were on me as I sat at the back of the room. I looked at other parents, who looked back at me. I tried to smile. I glanced back up at the teacher. She responded, “I got this.” We will see.

Tate came home the next day and said his English teacher had approached him.

“She said you asked her some tough questions at the open house last night. I didn’t know what she was talking about, though,” he shrugged.

Until this point, we hadn’t mentioned anything to our son because we wanted him to forge his own identity in the classroom and develop a relationship with his teacher without any influence about the concerns his Dad and I shared. I opened up to Tate and told him what I had asked of his teacher. He was fine with what I had asked, and it made sense to him that we just wanted to understand where she was coming from as his teacher. I assured him we would partner with his teacher and that we knew that if he needed support, he would let us know. I contacted the English teacher a few days later to connect with her. She expressed that she would love any feedback we had and thanked us for being supportive parents, and we connected by phone a few days later. She seemed genuinely interested in wanting to dialogue with me as a parent to discuss *A Raisin in the Sun* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She was vulnerable enough to express that at her previous “more diverse high school,” she had at least one Black father express concern about a

conversation during a class discussion about *A Raisin in the Sun*. The parent approached the school principal, and a parent conference took place. She did not elaborate on the outcome. I shared with her that *A Raisin in the Sun* can be misinterpreted if proper historical context about the play is not given. My son, being a Black male student, would react differently to the book than his peers. Tate was one of only two Black male students in the class. She responded that she had a lot to think about now that I had shared a different perspective.

Based on how she presented at Back-to-School Night, we knew Tate would see through any inauthenticity with her, so I narrowed the conversation down to just our son and who he was as a learner to help her build a good relationship with him. He can be timid in the learning environment though he actually has a very big personality. He can appear disengaged. He can appear distracted or reserved when he is reflecting. He needs time to think about what he will do because he doesn't want to do it wrong. The teacher said she noticed that her kids of color spoke out more at her last school, and the kids at our son's high school were much more reserved. If she were going to start with *A Raisin in the Sun*, it would be imperative to develop relationships with her students immediately.

However, a few days later, Tate seemed reluctant to dive into his English homework, dragging his feet. I asked what was up, and he just said he felt really annoyed in class, aggravated. "It's like she doesn't know how to handle the discussion correctly. It's SO ANNOYING!" he vented. Although the class was diverse, he was frustrated that the teacher seemed to have difficulty engaging the different points of view and was explaining the story in a "White teacher way."

I asked that he get through the assigned reading for the night and reminded him we would provide the space at home to allow for his truth to be heard. We commonly engage in family

meetings to make shared decisions, share stories, and listen to audiobooks or podcasts. In the meantime, I told him I would see if I could find a way to partner with his teacher positively. We wanted our son to keep speaking freely. We knew him well enough to know he would tell us if he needed our support. Later that evening, I emailed her to inquire about infusing more diverse authors into the student learning experience. She seemed a bit distracted by the term “diversity.” She responded by including the demographics of the students in our son’s class to somehow reassure us that our son was not the only student of color in his class but added that she would like to try embedding more diverse literature in her classroom when possible.

Unfortunately, this teacher and I never had another conversation. As Tate walked to the car after football practice the next day, there was a sulk in his step. He opened the car door and slung his backpack onto the floorboard, asking, “Oh, my God, why does my English teacher have to constantly say ‘Negro’ in English class?” As we drove to the store, Tate described the class discussion around *A Raisin in the Sun*. He was frustrated that the teacher seemed to overemphasize the word Negro and that the male students kept cutting up, having zero respect for her or the discussion she was trying to facilitate. He felt the students were left to imagine every Black family stereotype explored in the book because the teacher was incapable of expanding the conversation to counter these narratives from a systemic lens. Tate and I continued the discussion while we grabbed a few items at the store and soon made our way to the register. The young man at the register greeted us with a bright smile and began checking out our items.

Out of the blue, my son told no one in particular, “Man, I hate high school.” This statement came from a kid who had been dreaming of attending high school since he was four.

The cashier took the bait and responded in a heavy English accent, “Oh really? Is it the school environment or the teachers?”

“The teachers,” Tate responded.

Surprised, I turned and asked, “All of the teachers?”

“No, just one,” he confirmed.

The cashier invited Tate to say more, saying, “Tell me what’s going on.”

Suddenly, a conversation ensued between the two. Tate caught the cashier up to speed and asked the cashier if he ever felt the same way in a classroom, out of sorts, with an inept teacher failing miserably with racially sensitive content. The cashier said he could relate, not racially as a fellow Black male, but by not being an American citizen. The classics taught in American schools never included his perspective, and he could relate to my son’s loss of trust in the relationship with his English teacher three weeks into the school year.

“What would you do if you were still in high school and still in my position?” Tate asked the cashier.

“Well, if you think you can regain trust with your teacher, then maybe you could try and talk to her. But if you think her approach is going to be off and the relationship can’t be repaired after the way she approached that play, ask to be moved to another class. That’s what I would do.”

Tate whipped his neck to the left and looked at me with wide-open eyes and a look that asked, “You can actually DO something like that?”

I met his stare and asked, “Is that what you need?”

“Yes, that’s what I need,” Tate emphatically confirmed.

“Then, that’s what will happen,” I promised.

My son's face broke out into a huge smile. He looked at the cashier, who had a big smile on his face as well. Looking at the cashier as I wrapped up our transaction, I said, "Well, looks like we are headed home to have a family meeting!" We thanked him and left. On the drive home, my son and I reflected on the conversation with the cashier, knowing we would sit down as a family to make a final decision. Mostly, we enjoyed the car ride listening to music, a shared interest of both of us. We talked about songs, artists, sampling, and different genres all the time. Once we finished dinner and settled in, my husband, son, and I sat down to talk. I tossed the story to Tate to tell on his own. From there, he walked his Dad through his day in English class, the encounter with the store cashier, and the conclusion he had come to about the class. He did not want to finish reading *A Raisin in the Sun* with this teacher and didn't want to remain in the class. I had never asked for a change in classroom teachers for my son. Our son generally chose to handle things on his own. We never sought to take actions that sheltered him. However, this was about his dignity as a student and human being. When I asked him if he wanted us to intervene, he responded, "Do what you gotta do, Mom."

The following day, I had a district meeting to attend. I knew my son's principal would also be in attendance. I felt discussing a class change for my son would be better received in person. Once our district meeting ended, I approached the high school principal in the hallway. Although district colleagues who had always been amicable, she and I served the district at different levels and ran in different professional circles as a result. We exchanged pleasantries, and she asked how she could be of assistance. I briefly summarized what had occurred with my conversations with my Tate's English teacher, his experiences in her classroom with the current play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and his reflection the night before. I expressed how we had every intention to partner with this teacher. As fellow educators, we are all lifelong learners when

navigating the racialized experiences of our students. However, currently, where my son was in his racial identity development journey and where the English teacher was on her life journey as a White teacher was not a match. We were not asking for the canon of high school literature to be changed or for books to be banned. We were not asking for teachers to miraculously be trained to provide instruction rooted in critical race theory. We needed Tate's dignity to be honored as a student. She was very receptive to the conversation, and so I offered my two requests:

1. Place my son in a different English class.
2. Discontinue the expectation that our son read *A Raisin in the Sun*, and based on this lived experience, we ask that our son not be required to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain or other possible titles of concern that may surface in a syllabus.

The principal was entirely on board with our requests. She said she would begin working on a class change and asked if it would be okay if she routed me to the English Department Lead to further the discussion. She said Tate's high school was embarking on making curricular and instructional decisions more tightly rooted in equity and racial awareness. Now was a great time to let this conversation help fuel that change.

I had never talked with a department leader and was still wondering what to expect. I thanked her for taking my call. She shared that she had briefly spoken to the principal about our concerns, and she had heard we were concerned about our son's ability to express his authentic voice in class, concerns about the book he was reading, and our desire to opt him out of a book. Although she did not intend to justify the book selections, as they were decided before she was at the school, she supported them. She knew she could not control how individual teachers handled

certain classroom situations. However, since her role was to be a mentor or coach teachers in her department, she was very open to clarifying any questions we had or offering options for our son.

She was open to the conversation. This matter about the canon of literature was a systemic issue much more extensive than this high school. I also knew my son's experience as a Black male in our school district. I launched into the chain of events with the English teacher, beginning with her comments at the Back-To-School Open House about "those schools" and how her response to my question at the Back-To-School Open House struck a chord with my husband and me when she flatly stated, "I got this."

The English Department Lead continued to listen as I shared about my son's agitation with the reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I had tried to pinpoint the issue with him. Is it the classroom? Is it the teacher? Is it the tone of the teacher? Is it the context of the book? Is it the discussion? He said it was all of it. I shared the chain of correspondence I had held with the English teacher. I shared with her that the day before, on the way to school, Tate said, "You know, I just can't sit in a classroom with a White lady reading a book to me about an experience she hasn't had. That has nothing to do with my life the way she's teaching it. And I'm just sitting there reading a play with the word Negro in it for 90 minutes 'cause she keeps emphasizing it. Like, why do I have to do this?" Finally, I shared that we had expressed to our son that we did not know how much different it would be in another classroom because high school teachers carry varying degrees of instructional training, skill, will, and capacity about race. We would seek to opt him out of certain classic novels and offer other book selections where Black characters were celebrated, hopefully with a teacher more equipped to deliver instruction that fosters a sense of belonging and dignity for each student. I clarified that I did not see a space for these "classic" novels, especially if students have a visceral response to the literature. It is not the

book itself. It is the racial frame of the teacher delivering the instruction. We needed to support awareness in teachers about their White racial frames, and we needed to change the system. I knew I could not control that right now. I did not have the political capital. As the English Department Lead, she did not have the political capital, either. But what we could do is create a small lane for our son. Tate knows that we are not expecting a customized high school experience for him. He must push through challenging experiences. However, this is more about my child's dignity in a racialized space. I asked Tate, "On a scale of one to ten, what is your relief level about moving classrooms and having different options for some literature?" He gave me an eight. That's all the data I need.

The Department Lead went on to say the most challenging part about her job was defending things that were not her initial choices, but she did see value in a lot that was done at this high school. She mentioned that a student had recently interviewed her about outdated material in the curriculum. My response to her was that these works are systemically and intentionally left in place to maintain whiteness. The English Department Lead asked for some resources because she was struggling with the label of whiteness to describe these books that are considered essential classics. She stated that every year, the English department wants students to understand the classics so they can speak about them articulately. She shared that one of the intentional purposes for reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was to look at and analyze the novel's satire. She said Mark Twain was not just criticizing slavery. He was criticizing all humans. We were all hypocrites, and teachers touched on the race piece of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because the N-word is in there over 200 times, so she said that is important for them to discuss. Nevertheless, she felt the bigger context was how a writer uses satire to make a point during his time period. I responded by asking her who decided these works were classics

and whom they serve. I added that my child will not hear anything about satire in a novel that uses the N-word 219 times. Once Tate reads that word the first time, you will lose him because he will not hear anything else you have to offer from a novel written from a white racial frame.

She admitted asking her Black students if they were comfortable with a text. She had followed female Black students out into the hallway after class. She emphasized that she never had Black males in her AP Language courses. Rather than ask these Black female students if they were uncomfortable with a text, I suggested she change it. In addition, teachers are not always equipped to navigate conversations around race in the classroom.

I doubted the positive impact of the diversity training our district had been using for years. Our district has partnered with a consultation group focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion for over twenty years using a specific training model to supposedly ensure teachers engaged in culturally responsive teaching practices. It was my opinion that some district staff members go into the training already committed and engaged in self-reflection about race, and they come out of the training and continue their path of lifelong learning. Some staff members come out of the training experience angry and resentful because they take things personally instead of reflectively. I was once partnered with a White male teacher who claimed he needed five margaritas after attending the first day of the training because he felt so offended. The district has the situational power to require teachers to attend these diversity trainings. White teachers and Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized district staff members have expressed that the district fosters a culture of indignity where dignity violations are encouraged. Diversity training is deeply nestled in this negative district culture. Educators from marginalized groups have expressed being traumatized at these trainings, feeling tokenized and dehumanized as objects of discussion to nudge White teachers to understand their white privilege better. When

White educators feel their dignity has been violated at diversity training, students and teachers of marginalized groups inevitably bear the brunt of those perceived violations. White teachers must find a safe place to direct the negative energy they just received at a diversity training. These teachers return to their classrooms and take their anger out on our students of color. Other staff members come to the training and find it to be eye-opening for them. However, now they think, since they spent two eight-hour days in conversations about race, that they have been fully awakened to systemic racism. They go back to their classrooms and say ignorant things to students. Being a teacher, then a building principal, and a parent of a child in our district, I have had all three experiences. The high school canon of literature can cause the same dehumanization in our students of color. It is a more extensive conversation than just novels. The system of education is rooted in white supremacy. I cannot control dismantling such massiveness. Nevertheless, I can respond to my son saying that a class change is an eight out of ten relief for him.

The English Department Lead said she was struggling a bit against the bigger picture and tried to recapture what she thought was the bottom line: students need to see themselves positively represented in the literature taught. She also said that if they removed these texts that show those older perspectives and stereotypes, they would not have any left to teach. She admitted they had a lot of White men and White authors, and they wanted to add more women and authors of color into the curriculum, but it was hard to come up with titles. She said the conversation in the English department always seemed to circle back to sticking to the classics, claiming they are time tested in terms of appropriateness, not by topic or theme, but from the standpoint that no one will be upset about what happens in the book. She caught herself on the last point and realized people not getting upset did not seem as valid after the conversation she

and I were having. She still seemed stuck on how to go about finding new titles. There were better ways to determine what was working than asking for students' emotional health feedback while standing in the hallway. I suggested there was a power dynamic when she was the White teacher in the hallway asking a Black female student about her learning experience. What she sought would not be resolved by picking a new reading list. The school staff would have to decide which voices they would start listening to and which culture had the most value in the community. When I paused there, I vividly remember a few seconds of silence. She responded by saying that what I said made her stomach fall out of her body and that she didn't think she had it in her to lead such a department change, but at the same time, she was feeling emotional because she wanted to be a part of a legacy of change. I at least felt heard and maybe a little hopeful at this point. I asked for the next step to meet with the new teacher to collaborate on a comprehensive study plan when the teacher was delivering instruction for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

We discussed a transition plan and what text my son could read during this transition. He was already reading *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehise Coates (2015). The Department Lead mentioned they were trying to add Coates' nonfiction autobiographical work somewhere in the AP Language curriculum for seniors because she felt the content was quite lofty. I was taken aback just a little bit and shared with her that the author wrote the book for his 14-year-old son. Interestingly, she felt the content needed to be reserved for older Advanced Placement (AP) students. She mentioned that one Black male English teacher had brought it to her attention to add it to the curriculum at some point. That turned the conversation to which teacher might fit my son, possibly that Black male teacher. I told her I did not want her to feel like race was always a prerequisite for a teacher's capacity for a conversation about race. I was not fixated on the race of a teacher for my son's placement. You can have a Black teacher in a tokenized

headspace, and they can cause more trauma for a Black male student if they are not engaged in personal racial identity development work. We wanted a teacher who would be a willing and collaborative partner, not defaulting to putting all Black boys with Black male teachers. We also talked about the class Tate was departing. In this conversation, I had been advocating for my son's dignity. The English teacher also deserved dignity. I felt she deserved a conversation, and I was willing to stay engaged and support her and continue learning and growing at the same time. We left the conversation there with an upcoming class change for my son and a meeting to be scheduled with the new teacher.

What I did not know at the time was that on the day of this conversation with the English Department Lead, three Black male educators individually pulled Tate aside to ask him what was going on with the White teacher, picking him for information and offering him a safe space to talk if he ever needed it. He was also asked if he wanted to be in his coach's class, a Black male teacher. He said yes, so the decision was made before I had even had the conversation with my child. Although I was not convinced this would be a good match just based on the shared race and gender of the teacher, Tate seemed settled with the decision, knowing we planned to meet with this new teacher.

In late September, my husband and I arrived in the morning at our son's high school. We were greeted very kindly by the front office staff. Even with smaller routine meetings, my husband would always ask me to take the lead, and when he felt compelled to speak up, he would. Our son's new English teacher met us at the front office and escorted us back to a cubicle in the student library. He wanted to hear from us and felt we probably had some of the same ideas about how to proceed. He admitted that when Tate's former English teacher initially approached him about our son, he thought it was because Tate had a behavior issue. After all,

that is how it often goes with Black male students, but he quickly realized that was far from the truth. He had since spoken to the English Department Lead, who had explained that her conversation with me was about a systemic race issue related to the canon of literature. He said he had reminded her that the high school English department had discussed this a million times, knowing there was no quick fix.

We clarified that we were not necessarily upset. We realized this was a systemic issue that probably would never change but changing it for one student could lead to change for others. I truly believed we were not the first family to bring up concerns about books like *A Raisin in the Sun* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the instructions around them. The new English teacher confirmed we were not the first family to bring up our concerns, but he stated we were the first ones whose child's mother was a principal who was White and whose Black father was overly supportive. He didn't want to lie, but he said that it made a difference because I was already in the district.

We wanted to offer Tate's new English teacher more context and shared how our family talked very openly about race in our home, not assuming it was the same for him as a Black male, but we know being Black could, at some point in our son's life, be a life-or-death factor. My husband clarified that we were not seeking to shelter our son, but he felt the first English teacher failed to develop a relationship with Tate. Suppose the teacher does not have a relationship with students and is teaching racially charged content that focuses on stereotypes of groups of people. In that case, these images and descriptions can seep into your mind, and you can start to believe what is said about you, your race, or your culture. My husband felt the first teacher pressed that our son often seemed tired or was not paying attention in class, to which my husband asked, "Then what are you doing to engage him?" My husband shared that Tate did not

want to listen to a White teacher say “Negro” or the “N-word” in class over and over.

Relationship-wise, the first teacher lost our son early. My husband shared that he was not impressed with how she had referenced the school she came from during Back-to-School Night, saying, “I got this,” in response to her ability to tackle racialized topics. It was evident to him that she didn’t know what she didn’t know about racial matters. My husband wasn’t sure if she got it, but he expressed how I had intentionally left the door of communication open with her. At that point, I shared how the conversation with the first English teacher went during Back-to-School Night. My husband said that Tate had told him every class he had was fine except English class, and that got his attention right away because our son was the one who brought it up. As Tate’s football coach, this teacher noticed that our son didn’t generally bring things up or talk much, so clearly, there was enough concern for him to do so.

Regarding which class our son should have been moved to, I was not a proponent of an invisible burden on Black male teachers always being given Black male students. That’s not always a fix. A Black male teacher might be on a different journey and feel students need to have these experiences and read these works. Black teachers or Black students can be left feeling tokenized. I shared that while our son may be naïve to think that any Black teacher would have the same concerns he does, he does know the difference between a dignified classroom space and the dehumanizing experience he was having with the previous White teacher. The current white racial frame of the teacher, the high school’s culture, the lack of intentional teacher training, and the minimal pockets of skill, will, and capacity of the staff to deliver dignified instruction that sought to offer a sense of belonging to every single student made such classic canonical works non-negotiable hard no’s for us and for Tate.

This new English teacher expressed that he was on a similar journey advocating for inclusive literature. He was a proponent of Black literature, knowing there was a shortage of it in canons of literature and that, for him, the idea of the Black male figure being positive must be number one. He agreed with my husband that perpetual negative representations of Black culture can become embedded in the minds of all students. He offered that most teachers at this high school would run away from conversations about race because they do not know how to navigate the content in a way that keeps Black students comfortable. He took pride in addressing race issues head-on by not teaching traditionally, stating that he felt the topic of rape in *To Kill a Mockingbird* was of more concern for him than race. He knew that we read a lot at home and asked if we were okay using alternative texts for our son, as though it was his idea. Using alternative texts is why we called the meeting. Yes, we were. My husband reiterated that we wanted Tate to be pushed but he was firm that this teacher could not lose sight that our son was a good kid. We have conversed a lot with him and believe that students should be offered dignified learning experiences.

We shared how Tate reasonably knows how to navigate issues of race. Being called the N-word on the first day of football practice was something he addressed on his own. However, the learning environment in his previous English class does not fit the construct of what he knows he should be experiencing in school. My husband elaborated on his conversation with our son about the N-word, its use, how to address those situations, and how it was not a term he used lest it be used toward him. The teacher nodded in agreement and gave my husband a quiet, “Yes, Sir.” He also added how often Black students were sent to him because he is a Black teacher, that he doesn’t mind it, but it is a thing that surfaces a lot. I confirmed to him that we felt that was an invisible burden often placed on Black teachers. As White folks, we need to minimize the

invisible burden because we need to be well-read, humble, and able to see others as fully human. White people need to be accomplices and not just leave these conversations to our colleagues of color. I connected this to my frustration with our district diversity training and how, in those trainings, we are tokenizing our colleagues of color so that we can end up with all the White female teachers crying about how guilty they feel about race personally when we should be talking about system racism and ways to dismantle it. I connected my frustration with diversity training to the canon of literature, just as I had with the English Department Lead, asking, “Are we tokenizing Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine, and other marginalized students through literature for the sake of White kids learning a message?” This teacher nodded and then asked whether, because our son is of mixed race with a White mother, he identified with White females as a haven when it comes to race. I quickly responded that this was a no. Furthermore, Tate identified as a Black male. We talk about being cautious around White girls and White teachers. He has had White teachers that he loves just as much as his Black teachers. He knows how to analyze who is safe and who is not. Nevertheless, as a White Mom, I am very direct with him about being aware of the character of others.

The teacher paused a second and then stated that because of this conversation he was having with us seemed to be a priority to us, he would be meaner to our son because of it. I quickly asked him to define what he meant by “mean.” He clarified that if this class change and this opportunity to access alternative texts were essential to our son, he would need to prove it by being dedicated to the books he reads and the assignments this teacher would give to him because this would be more challenging work. I responded that our son should not be penalized for asking for alternative texts. There should already be a comprehensive plan for any student needing such differentiation, but clearly, there was not. We were looking for a dignified

experience for our child. If he felt like this was going to be a burden for him, and if he felt like he would have to do extra work for our son, then maybe this was not a fit. However, if he was partnering with us from the standpoint of being our son's only Black male teacher in his high school career that he could look back on as having been an accomplice and a mentor who pushed him from a place of dignity, we were behind him. Our son would have an instinct about what was being said in class, and he would need to be able to articulate himself. We don't want him looking back twenty years from now saying, "I didn't have language. I couldn't defend myself and my thinking because I didn't have the words."

My husband's reaction to the term "mean" was more gender-based, that as Tate's football position coach and English teacher, he wanted him to stay on top of his education over girls and football, and that this teacher understood this expectation. The teacher said that when a Black male student was reassigned to his class, it was usually because the student was so uncomfortable that he needed to be around someone who looked like him just so he could function. He felt Tate had more confidence and the opportunity to be pushed. I took this to reflect toxic masculinity common in high school sports connected to this his role as a football coach and saw no parallel that should be drawn related to this teacher's intention to support Tate academically in the classroom setting.

My husband and I backfilled the teacher with some of Tate's experiences in elementary and middle school. At his elementary school, students, especially Black males, were forced into a box. If they did not function in that box, they must have had a learning disorder or disability. This teacher wanted to change that narrative about Black and Brown students not being seen as academic stars at this high school. We just wanted this teacher to meet our needs in his learning space. He felt he could.

I shared that I was the only White female administrator who was the parent to a son who identifies as a Black male attending school in the same district. I was partnering with a parent in the school community I serve to remove some offensive texts from our elementary school library, and I was also learning in that process. These racialized structures will be so deeply rooted in our educational system until we decide that we are going to change or expand whose voices matter. Until we were willing to stop doing that, all we could do was try to change things so one student was not dehumanized through literature. We want a small change for our son. By whose definition are these books classic? We say it's the American experience. No, it is the White American experience, and forcing Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine and White teachers to perpetuate that myth is, by design, to maintain whiteness in our education system. We are all pawns if we choose to play.

This English teacher said there were twenty-two English teachers at the school, and only two were Black males. He recently got Coates in the curriculum, but the author's work was only for AP classes, which he said he understood because he felt the school didn't have the diverse student population to support these diverse books beyond AP classes. I challenged that idea, suggesting that all students must read diverse works. The teacher felt that until more parents spoke up, the community was on the side of the English Department, not teachers or families who wanted to challenge the lack of diversity in the canon of literature. The teacher began to chuckle a little when he recalled his conversation with the English Department Lead and how she had danced around his question about who Tate's mom was. "Is she.....?"

"Yes. She's White. And she's a building administrator in our district!"

This scenario had never happened before at this high school.

As we wrapped up, I asked if there was a specific interest this teacher was having in our son's racial identity experience. He had referred to Tate as Biracial, but our son identified as a Black male. He stated that he had married a Caucasian woman and had a Biracial son. He just said he was reflecting on things coming down the road for his family. My husband and I shared a few anecdotes and offered to be a resource should he ever want to talk further. I offered that the most challenging conversations I have as a White woman are with other White women married to Black men. The teacher nodded his head.

So, in sharing a summary of this lived experience as a family, I confirmed with Malita that based on the incident with *A Raisin in the Sun*, our concern was about how things would go regarding other canonical choices placed in front of our son. We agreed that he would not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Malita was shocked to discover that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was still on the required reading list in high schools. "So, this is definitely a K-12 issue then," she reflected.

Fall Break in October 2018 found us back in Washington, D.C. We had visited four years prior, but my husband, son, and I had two agenda items for this trip. We planned to visit Howard University, and we wanted to visit the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture. Right after we landed, we made a quick drive out to Howard University to do a quick look around the campus before staying with a family friend for the evening. We took a half day to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture a day later. Words defy me to describe the historical rawness, pain, brilliance, elegance, and beauty curated in this space.

One highlight that resonated with our son was rounding a corner to view a more modern-day display focused on Black culture. Among other artifacts from plays, movies, and TV shows

was a display of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which included the playbill, a brief historical summary, and other items from the play. Our son paused to take in the imagery. My husband and I glanced at each other, knowing this would somehow resonate with him after his experience with the play in English class. We waited as our son looked over the display. After about thirty seconds, he pivoted on his heel, swinging his head to look back at us, and stated, “See, I *knew* she was teaching that play wrong. She *never* discussed the power of Black voices on Broadway.” “I know *that’s* right!” my husband responded as we continued to the next display.

Later in the week, we returned to Howard University to see about participating in a walking tour around campus. We arrived right on time for the next tour in the next half an hour. We strolled around for a bit and then returned to the designated location for the start of the tour. We were ushered into a small meeting space to receive a brief overview of the campus, its history, and information for prospective students. The next phase was gathering outside for the walking tour. As the tour commenced, Tate basically and lovingly split with us as he smiled back at us while making his way toward the front of the group of young people participating. My husband and I maintained our distance toward the back, chuckling with other parents as our kids embraced their independence. We wrapped up our day by taking in a soul food meal at the nearby Florida Avenue Grill, sitting in the same booth where Martin Luther King once ate in 1963 when he was planning the March on Washington. It wasn’t until a few weeks later that the impact on our fourteen-year-old son from visiting the Howard campus became evident. Before fall break, our family had been reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, a memoir written by a Black man for his fourteen-year-old Black son about American racism. His English teacher asked our son to write an essay summarizing his take-aways from reading the book. Our son infused his reflections from the book with his experience of visiting Howard University. In

short, he summarized that schools like his current high school, all shiny and new, can convince you that they have everything you need to succeed in school and life. However, as a Black male, he noticed an extreme difference between Black students at his school and those he encountered on the Howard University campus. Currently feeling slightly suffocated in his learning environment, he said the students at Howard owned the sidewalk, head held high. He wanted that experience, too. He summarized in his essay that he knew then that wherever he chose to continue his education, it had to be a place that nurtured his mental health as a human being—a place like Howard. We wanted our son's first college campus experience or tour to be at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) because we knew he would never forget the feeling of that experience.

Right after we returned from Washington D.C., the movie *The Hate You Give*, based on the novel of the same name written by Angie Thomas (2017), was released in theatres. Tate had already read the novel. Anytime a text is produced as a movie, we try to read it prior to watching the movie. A culminating scene in the movie is where one of the main characters finds her voice and literally speaks her truth into a megaphone for all to hear at a student protest. As this scene developed, I glanced at my son sitting beside me. Tate quietly pivoted in his seat, drew his knees in, pulled his hoodie over his head, drew the hood strings tight, and crossed his arms across his chest. The main character was speaking about her rage and despair related to police brutality and the revolution that is taking place in her soul. As the powerful scene ended, I saw my son wipe a tear from his eye. I quietly asked, "You good?" He nodded. I left it alone. As we drove home from the movie, Tate expressed, "Yo, I could relate to her and how she felt about police brutality. It is no different for me a lot of the time, wondering if I will ever experience police brutality." How many other families at our son's school were having this same conversation, I

wondered. I also wondered how many of my own colleagues were having these sorts of conversations.

Before Spring Break, I wanted to check how things were going for our son in his English class. His teacher responded that Tate did not seem as motivated. Well, I certainly did not expect to get this response. As far as we knew, things had been going smoothly, so we were concerned. We sat down as a family to discuss what was playing out in Tate's English class. He had finished reading *Between the World and Me* and was now reading Noah's (2016) *Born a Crime* as an alternative text. The agreement was that our son would have an alternative text when his teacher delivered instruction on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The teacher and I had discussed these text choices to give our son a few alternative titles to work through for a month or two and then revisit. That was the reason I had reached out again recently. Tate explained that the class was reading *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999) while he was reading *Born a Crime*. Okay, I'm unsure why he was reading an alternative text if the class was not reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

We asked our son what might be the root of this diminished motivation. We asked if it was distracting for him to receive alternative direct instruction than his peers in class. That is when our son told us, throughout two novels, that his teacher had placed him in the hallway. The hallway. Alone. In high school, students often use the hallways to spread out for group projects, but this was not the case. When we asked him why he had not told us about this, he said he was under the impression from his teacher that we knew about it. No, we did *not!* His Dad and I tried to stay calm and focus on our son's emotions and thoughts. We were *fuming*. Tate expressed that it felt awkward and that he felt alone but that he just dealt with it. He was in class for grammar instruction but not the novel studies. We knew he was a very social learner and thrived off teacher relationships and feedback. So, to know that for weeks, he had been intermittently placed

in the hallway to work through written assignments alone was not dignified for our son! The essence of the conversation left us under the impression that our son was gaslit into believing he had made or accepted this option. Further, why was he out in the hallway with an alternative text when the class was not reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*? My husband and I were traveling out of town for a long weekend, and I wanted to take the conversation further once I understood more. I was nervous about leaving my son in the school's hands for even a day with this conversation lingering.

On the plane, I quickly read *Speak*, only to discover the novel included a high school rape scene at a house party. Now, I was further confused. I pointed out critical paragraphs to my husband, and we both began reflecting on our conversation with the teacher back in September. Wait a second. Hadn't the teacher suggested that the topic of rape was too bold for fourteen-year-old students? Yes. Also, hadn't he suggested he felt comfortably positioned to deliver instruction on race and racism head-on, that other teachers might shy away from instead? Yes. Had he confused the two? All our conversations were about the use of the N-word in literature and the concerns we had about teachers being able to navigate this. It seemed this man had locked it into his mind that the rape conversation was of concern but that he felt he could tackle racism.

My husband was not having any of this and asked me to reach out to the principal. He always felt more comfortable if I broached these conversations as the White parent and district employee. Once we got back to town, I emailed requesting a meeting with the principal and teacher. I expressed that it had come to our attention that our agreement regarding our concerns about our son's experience in English class has not been met. Specifically, instead of providing a learning alternative that respects Tate's dignity, his teacher resorted to sending our son to the

hallway to read, resulting in the humiliation we were trying to avoid. Had we known earlier this year that this was going to be the method of instruction, we would have requested some form of independent study. We requested a meeting to get clarification on this issue. As a professional courtesy, we wanted the principal to know we were elevating this issue to the compliance officer to investigate potential civil rights violations. At the very least, we believed that two Board policies (AC-R-6: Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Ethnicity and Race and IMA: Teaching Methods) had not been followed. We needed a comprehensive English plan for the coming years, as we could not have our son sitting in the hallway. Nor could we, as parents, force our son to endure the humiliation of hearing racial slurs through literature that would not be tolerated in any other place on the high school campus but in English class.

I sent a similar email correspondence to our district's Compliance Officer. Both the building principal and the Compliance Officer responded very quickly. We never had a direct issue with the school principal. She had always been responsive thus far. We knew she was trying to lead transformational change around such issues, so we only focused on our son's experience. Possibly, if we elevated our concerns, conversations could begin so that other students would not be put in the same predicament at some point down the line. We knew our son was not the only one experiencing dehumanizing educational traumas in high school.

The Compliance Officer and I talked about all the details involved. I remember having to pause and control the lilt of my voice before I could speak calmly about what my son was experiencing. We also talked about the outdated policies I cited around teacher training and student dignity, and she admitted that she needed to be better versed in civil rights concerns where race was the context. She let us know our rights as parents, and we planned to follow up after our parent meeting. I felt anxious about confronting this situation for my son, as both a

parent and an employee of the district. My husband felt we were doing the right thing—changes were needed. So be it if there would be a cost to me as an employee. Tate’s dignity was always going to be the priority.

A few days before our meeting at the high school, Tate sent me a text from English class. His teacher had handed out an excerpt of *To Kill a Mockingbird* with corresponding questions to which the students were to respond. Our son said he respectfully sat in silence, did not engage with the text, and waited until class ended. What did this teacher not understand? The teacher’s behavior felt ludicrous at this point. I sent correspondence to our son’s principal summarizing all our conversations up to that point about the literary canon, not just with Tate’s first English teacher but also with the English Department Lead and his current English teacher. We were very clear that our son be given alternative literature for both *To Kill a Mockingbird* this year and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* his junior year. This expectation was non-negotiable. We were shocked at how this played out for our son, and we were seeking an immediate and comprehensive resolution because all these elements played a role in a dehumanizing learning experience for our son. The school principal was very responsive and corresponded immediately, and arrangements were made for our son until we could meet as a team.

We have never been parents to shield our child from controversial truths. When Tate would approach us with a question, we would ask him his thoughts on the topic and then respond to him honestly but in a developmentally appropriate way. We felt he needed to be exposed to the general content of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to understand better why we responded to his school the way we did over *A Raisin in the Sun* so he could make informed decisions about his educational career and experiences.

As a family, we sat down that Saturday night and watched the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* together. About twenty minutes in, our son hollered, “Pause!” We paused the movie. He sat upright on the couch and exclaimed, “*This! This right here!* This moment in the story is where the conversation would go wrong in the classroom. The teacher would not be able to handle it. Most kids in the class would think Tom was guilty. A few of us would know he was *not* guilty, and an argument would have developed, and my friends and I would be *so frustrated* at the conversation, yo!” Throughout the movie, Tate continued to holler for the movie to be paused to simulate how this would have gone down in the classroom. He clarified that he could handle these situations, but Tate also thanked us for knowing what he needed.

The following Monday in early April, my husband met with the principal, one assistant principal, the outgoing English Department Lead, the incoming English Department Lead, and the classroom teacher for this lengthy meeting. The principal offered to take notes. My husband opened the conversation directly, stating that our son could not and should not be placed in the hallway for instructional purposes, rhetorically asking that this concern about the canon of literature must come up every year. The incoming English Department Lead said that in her twenty-four years in education, only two parents had requested that their child not read a specific text. We knew otherwise from our son’s current English teacher, so my husband pushed back and said we had been told otherwise. This student experience is more common than they were letting on.

To Kill a Mockingbird was not being taught within the realm of literature that includes diversity in authorship. No specialized training exists for teachers to deliver delicate instruction. One of the objectives is navigating the N-word. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the training wheels novel to prepare for reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. We do not allow this language

anywhere else on a school campus. We burden our Black teachers with the conversation. There needs to be a comprehensive alternative plan to offer students a dignified learning experience. We reminded our son's current English teacher that we had engaged in multiple conversations over the school year, so the hurtful part for us as parents was that we felt like he sold out our son when he put him in the hall and did not tell us this was his answer to an alternative plan.

The hallway is not a comprehensive plan. We felt like the second time this teacher sold out our son was when he suddenly brought up a concern about our son's cell phone usage in class. He was reaching. Cell phone use had never been discussed. It almost felt like he had confused Tate with another student entirely. The third sell-out was when he gave our son *To Kill a Mockingbird* materials. I reminded the teacher that he had passionately expressed to us that he was focused on intentionally infusing African-American Literature into the canon of literature. It concerned us that he sat in class for thirty minutes doing nothing when material for *To Kill a Mockingbird* was handed out. There was no follow-up with Tate. He would not disrespect his teacher, so he sat in that classroom, did nothing, and then brought that material home. What that taught us as parents was how much that experience with *A Raisin in the Sun* impacted him. For him to sit in class and not engage in that work, he thought, "I'm not going back down that path."

The English Department Lead acknowledged that she was the one who gave that example about using *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a beautiful novel to explore satire. However, she now wanted to clarify her statement that satire was not the only reason they chose to teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I respectfully disagreed. These books were all chosen from a white racial frame. We were not protecting our son from these texts. We were protecting Tate from teachers' inability to teach these novels and maintain his dignity at the same time.

The English teacher expressed that his approach to instruction was using resources he thought were suitable for young Black males. This guy basically felt he could handle it and that our son just needed to be back in class. I responded that our son would not return to class and do what everyone else does. There is a policy that protects him from that. The teacher was still missing the point. We did not care how skilled this teacher felt he was. Our son was not going to read these novels. Our son's dignity had been violated. Not just for our son, but the school's responsibility is to have a system in place. They were going to have to figure that out.

The teacher took it personally that we felt he had violated our son's dignity. He conveyed that there had not been some big falling out between him and Tate. It bothered him that we felt his action of handing our son materials for *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a direct shot at our son. He knew we did not want him reading the novel. His response?

He firmly stated, "I did not know this."

He went for a lie. Immediately, my husband responded to that comment.

He wasn't having it and firmly responded, "Oh no, we said there would be absolutely zero tolerance for that novel. One hundred percent."

We were stunned and more than frustrated. How did he not know? That was the entire premise of this conversation all year! When we met in September, he told my husband and me that the principal and the English Department Lead had also made it crystal clear to him that Tate was not reading three texts. At that meeting, he even told us that one of his colleagues refused to teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. My husband moved the conversation forward by requesting better communication for the remainder of the year.

The principal then mentioned needing to look at the books they did have, and if satire is the avenue, if that is the biggest reason, are there other books we can use to teach at that same

skill level? She mentioned that these conversations had taken place, and we were bringing this up on the heels of the work they were beginning at the school, which we understood. We reiterated that our son otherwise enjoyed being in this teacher's class. However, it was disheartening that he initially thought Tate was being rerouted to him as a behavior issue. That's an invisible burden on teachers of color. The teacher expressed that he saw himself as a beacon for Black kids who came to him and wanted to support them. I wondered how we could empower teachers of all races to take on that relationship piece so we were not always defaulting to Black teachers. Both should be able to be true.

The principal offered, and we agreed, that even an independent study is not a solution. The system needs to change. We agreed that for the next two months, our son at least needed to be in the library to maintain his dignity better than to be in the hallway. Two years later, our son ended up in the AP Language class of the original English Department Lead, the one who felt her stomach falling out of her body when reflecting on the needed change toward a more diverse canon of literature. There was one book title missing from her syllabus that year. Neither my son nor any other eleventh-grade student in her classes read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Analysis

“Are we unaware that anything exists beyond the light provided by a system designed to maintain itself?” (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 5). I had relied solely on district professional development for my White racial identity growth. However, it had finally crossed my mind to look beyond my organization because I knew harm was happening. I was a witness to the racial trauma experienced by my son. Although my knowledge and ability to communicate about these concerns were still developing, pushing back against the provided curriculum by applying new knowledge I was gaining represents how I began to dismantle and rebuild my white racial frame,

which responds to my second research question: How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?

Within the field of education, white supremacy often “goes undetected, despite the major implications it imposes on the educational equity of students of color” (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 35). We were no longer talking about just any student. We were now talking about my son. The deep sense of responsibility and raw emotion that surfaced while trying to be an advocate for my son while still trying to develop as a human felt like a relentless wave was repeatedly slamming me in the back, pushing me off balance and moving me forward whether I was ready or not. National standards in educational leadership do not require administrators in education to explore how the legacy of slavery, racism, and anti-Blackness contribute to present-day challenges in schools (Waite & Ehrich, 2022). However, as a mother and a school leader, I could no longer allow my lack of knowledge to limit my ability to interrogate systemic racism and support the students and communities I was called to serve. I was going through the process of changing my framing by acquiring the knowledge and experience needed to redevelop my white racial frame from a position of racial arrogance to one of vulnerability and racial humility (Feagin, 2013).

Driven by more informed hope, I focused my engagement with the educators at my son’s school in a way that might also gently move them forward to be better-prepared educators of English literature who could eventually interrogate and disrupt canonical ideologies (Dyches & Thomas (2020). Through the lens of CWS, it appeared that my son’s teachers did not have the skills or capacity to support students’ interrogation and disruption of canonical ideologies because they had not yet fully developed their own racial identity.

Similarly, CRT asserts that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life (Matsuda et al., 1993). Because of racial permanence, the high school canon of literature is allowed to persist generation after generation. CRT also asserts that the interests of both White people and people of color must converge if there is to be racial progress (Matsuda et al., 1993). The interest convergence principle hypothesizes that Black people only make gains against racial oppression when their interests converge with those of White elites (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Society will always sacrifice the rights of Black people to protect the political or economic interests of White people; and (b) society will only recognize the rights of Black people and other oppressed groups when and only if the recognition benefits the political or economic interests of White people (Bell, 2000).

Related to the curriculum, the challenge of converging interests is that White people may worry about how policy or system changes might threaten their status or position, and they struggle with sharing benefits and privileges they have enjoyed exclusively that could transform the education system to be advantageous for all people (Bell, 1980). Change is often purposefully or even subconsciously slow, at the will of White people who historically change policies or practices as they deem necessary to maintain their power or status quo (Milner et al., 2013). Unless the stakeholders at my son's high school valued the infusion of diversity into the canon of literature or stood to benefit from a change in the canon of literature, the curriculum would never change.

Through the lens of CWS, I could now see how the high school stakeholders were invoking their right to whiteness as property and the rights to use and enjoyment by sustaining a canon of literature rooted in white supremacy. On September 15, 2019, National Public Radio

(NPR) posted on Facebook to highlight Jasmine Cho, who summarized white privilege this way: “Privilege is when your culture is taught as a core curriculum, and mine is taught as an elective.”

Whiteness allows for certain cultural, social, and economic privileges. In a school setting, this can be interpreted as the difference between those students who possess the right to access what the school can offer—both in the environment and with the curriculum—versus those students who do not due to an inability to access the benefits of whiteness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). White students can enjoy the privilege of whiteness socially, culturally, and economically in society and within school settings’ systems, structures, and curricula (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

As I continued dismantling and rebuilding my white racial frame, I could now begin to speak to the high school stakeholders’ belief in the right to exclude rooted in the ideology that whiteness is a socially constructed concept that denotes the absence of the contamination of Blackness (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994). In a school setting, exclusion was first demonstrated by refusing Black people access to education. Over time, this tradition evolved into segregated schools. The existing tracking systems were then repurposed to track gifted programs, honors programs, and advanced placement classes to make them more accessible to White students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Making *Between the World and Me* accessible only to AP Language students with an admission that Black male students were never even in those courses, members of the English department wanted to teach his book to primarily White students, not Coates’ intended audience.

The curriculum does not stand alone and requires implementation by educators.

Daily micro events are demonstrated in the practices of teachers and administrators and expose internalized manifestations of institutionalized racism (Holt, 1995). Kohli et al. (2017)

argued that it is the normalization of everyday incidents of racism that obstructs our ability to dismantle systemic racism. Research conducted by Hotchkins (2016) explored racial microaggressions experienced by Black male students based on the prejudicial beliefs held by White teachers.

However, in my son's case, it was his Black male teacher ascribing these same beliefs:

1. Assuming that my son had behavior issues
2. Insisting on delivering the planned curriculum rooted in white supremacy
3. Placing our son in the hallway in a dehumanizing way

Within the scope of CRT, intersectionality scholarship requires researchers to recognize that all forms of subordination are interlocked and mutually reinforcing (Matsuda, 1991a).

Informed by intersectionality theory, multidimensionality reminds oppressed groups that the hierarchy of all forms of personal identity is influenced by the legal and social interests of the group members and the biases group members hold about race, gender, and other identity features (Valdes, 1997). My son's Black male English teacher was also experiencing sub-oppression through the invisible burden of being singled out to take "troubled" Black male students as a systemic solution. William Cross (1971) was an early pioneer of the Black racial identity model used to illustrate the stages Black or African Americans go through while developing a fully integrated racial identity. If Black people accepted being Black, they were assumed to be psychologically healthy and had high self-esteem. In contrast, if a Black person accepted the values of White society, he was believed to suffer from self-hatred and low self-esteem (Cross, 1971). I would argue that my son's English teacher exhibited behaviors that aligned to the role the system of white supremacy wanted him to play which was in direct conflict regarding how Tate had begun to psychologically see himself as unapologetically Black.

My husband and I recognized how dangerous this could be for our son. In a school setting, students are only rewarded when they conform to white norms in their dress, speech, and concepts of knowledge (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). My son was code-switching between home and school. He felt he had to be very polished at school but felt that once he got home, he could relax and let his full humanity come to life. Continued work on my part would be imperative for me to have the empathy and humility to understand the level of self-care my son should be able to engage in to function and feel fully human as a confident, unapologetic, phenomenally Black young man.

I could now recognize that my son was engaged in a behavioral vacillation (BV) avoidance strategy (Hotchkins, 2016). Tate was using his ability to avoid reinforcing negative teacher perceptions of stereotypical Black male behavior by adjusting his behavior in direct relation to his proximity to the school environment. He presented as a quiet, reflective, rule follower at school. But once he got home, he would often take over our Sonos sound system via the app, capture his latest favorite song on Spotify, pump up the volume, and make a dramatic entrance into the living room so full of life, lyrics, laughter, and love. It was a clear indication of how much he was holding in all day long. My son was also engaged in an integrative mobility (IM) avoidance strategy. This strategy included his intentional action as a Black male to form meaningful alliances with other racialized student populations beyond his Black social circles (Hotchkins, 2016). He has always sustained a very diverse population of friends that cut across intersectionalities, genders, races, religions, and orientations. Since he was a small child, he could make friends easily, and he incorporated his core values around friendships into an intentional action to build meaningful alliances with others.

Over time, my husband and I witnessed our son develop a healthy Black racial identity as he experienced moments of validation, such as during our visit to Howard University and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I knew I must continue to evolve to constantly rise and meet my son where he needed me to be. Likewise, I felt compelled to continue developing my white racial frame in a way that allowed marginalized students in the community to feel validated and to have their voices heard. I knew it was going to come at a cost.

February 2018 to September 2019

Me

Eleven months earlier, in the Spring of 2018, I was visited by Alexia, a female assistant superintendent at the elementary school where I was in my seventh year as the principal. One of Alexia's roles was to have a conversation with school leaders about their hopes or intentions for leadership or to inform them if they were going to be moved to a new building. Unless a school leader did something egregious, it was a given that once you made it to a principalship, you would sustain that role or one above it going forward in your career. This district was one to grow its leaders from within. So, this conversation with Alexia helped inform the decision she would make regarding my subsequent placement as a school principal.

The conversation began with the typical pleasantries and then moved into getting to know each other. We had never really gotten to know each other too personally, but I had always had a positive relationship with Alexia. She asked a bit about my family and shared more about hers. We talked about years of service, being female leaders, her perspective as a Black female leader, and mine from the perspective of a White female leader. We talked about race, our equity work, and some of the directional changes the district would be making. She asked some questions

about my guiding principles of leadership, eventually leading to her pointed question, “If you could pick any school, where would you want to go?”

I knew better than to answer that question. We even joked about it. If I were to name a specific school of choice, I would have no room for error in my leadership in that new community. Each school leader thinks they may know all there is to know about a school community, but without first-hand experience, it would be naïve to assume I knew what school was the best fit for me to serve as the school leader. Rather than answer the question with a school name, I offered that based on what was known about the culture and needs of the available schools, what was known of my leadership skills, and the direction the district was headed, please place me in a school where my skill set is needed so that I can best serve the needs of the students, staff, and community. Our conversation wrapped up and sat dormant for three months.

During the first week in May 2018, in a quick, choreographed move one afternoon, announcements were made simultaneously about the change in leadership for multiple elementary schools. I was ready for a change, excited about my new leadership opportunity, and on alert about the principal I was following at the new elementary school. I had this lingering voice telling me I was being set up.

Ten months before my new leadership opportunity was announced, all district and school administrators were gathered in July 2017 for the beginning-of-the-year K-12 administration meeting to set the tone for the year. The superintendent would always present the theme and goals for the year, introductions were made, and the work would begin. This year, our superintendent, Jim, wanted to once again highlight the existence of racism as an impact on our work in education, and he encouraged us to be aware and diligent leaders who would speak up

against inequities. The year before, to drive home this point, Jim donned a black hoodie and drew up the strings of the hood to demonstrate to us our reaction to someone who looked like him, a White male, in the hoodie versus Trayvon Martin, a Black male teenager from five years ago. Among others, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Eric Harris, William Chapman II, Sam Dubose, Jeremy McDole, Ricky Ball, Jamar Clark, John Crawford III, and Philando Castile were all Black men who had all been killed by police since Trayvon Martin's death. Mr. Castile's murder was only eighteen days earlier. The difference was that Trayvon was killed by a civilian rather than a police officer, so it seemed he wanted to use a safer example while ironically trying to be provocative. The stunt did sort of shock most of us in the room.

As Jim closed his presentation by highlighting the topic of racism once again this year, I could feel a sigh forming in the back of my throat as I looked down at my hands. Suddenly, the superintendent stated, "If you don't believe that racism is still an issue, just look at the fact that the word 'N*****' was spray painted across LeBron James' garage door." My neck snapped back, and I looked at the superintendent in shock. I heard quiet gasps not only from my Black peers sitting on either side of me but from my own throat. What the fuck did he just say? He said the ENTIRE N-word—the entire word. Jim just said the N-word. On purpose. Unapologetically. With free abandon. I was shocked. I was angry. I felt numb. I cannot even imagine what my peers were feeling. No one made any sudden movements. No one challenged the situation. I think we were all too stunned. Our small friend group spoke quietly about it over our lunch break. I went home later that afternoon, and our conversations continued via phone and text.

The following day, I pulled up to another elementary school for my summer work hours. I was displaced from my building for summer repairs. I wasn't there five minutes before my

colleague, a Black male asked me how I felt about what happened in our administration meeting the day before. We closed the conference room door and had a conversation. We both felt compelled to reach out to someone above us to share our concerns. I reached out to my supervisor. I know the two of us were not the only ones to express feeling upset by the actions of our superintendent. I was granted permission to contact Anthony, the assistant superintendent overseeing our district's diversity, equity, and inclusion work (DEI).

Our conversation started with me asking how Anthony felt about Jim's use of the entire N-word. He expressed that he was utterly shocked that our superintendent said such a thing but that he was not offended as a Black male. His stance was that sometimes it takes a shock to wake up White folks into considering a different perspective. I agreed that sometimes shock might work temporarily, but I disagreed that this was the way to do this. My concern was the longer-term effects this could have. What if one of our White colleagues returned to their building and had the same conversation with their staff? What if teachers took it upon themselves to stage the same shock value in a classroom? He said everyone was entitled to different perspectives. He wanted to meet over lunch to talk further. However, something interesting happened between this conversation and our lunch meeting.

Every month, we have a K-12 meeting for all administrators. Everyone sits in the same zone in the ample meeting space during every meeting, usually by building level. It is predictable. Nevertheless, this morning, Alexia who would later assign me to my new principalship made her way over to the table where I was seated with my usual crew of friends. We all quietly gestured to one another with our eyes. The fact that this person was sitting with us was unusual.

And then it became suddenly clear why Alexia was seated next to me. Jim launched into a conversation with all of us in the room. He expressed that it had been shared with him that he had offended people in this room when he used the N-word to illustrate a point during our last meeting, “And for that, I apologize,” he said flippantly, flicking one of his hands in the air. Precisely in sync with the superintendent uttering those five words, Alexia pivoted her torso in my direction, put her left elbow on the table, her right hand on her right hip, and sharply dipped her head down to the left and forward in my direction, as if to say, “Are you happy NOW?”

I could feel her gestures in motion and actively chose not to make eye contact with her. My colleagues at the table saw what had just happened. All Black and Hispanic/Latine women besides myself at that table, and we all knew not to react. I locked eyes with the peer to my right. We didn’t have to say a word. Our eyes said everything to each other. Alexia sat next to me because she wanted to publicly put me in my place for questioning the superintendent’s actions.

Following this incident, over lunch, I met again with Anthony who led our equity work. Going into this lunch meeting, I intended to listen to his perspective. However, the chain of command was evident after the encounter at the K-12 administration meeting. We tried to converse authentically, but I was guarded now. I shared with Anthony that it was evident that anything I told him was shared with Alexia, to which he responded, “Well, not everything.” He tried to pick me for information as to how I arrived at this conclusion. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of saying anything about the exchange between Alexia and me. We both knew it. I left it at that. Any trust I may have had with either of these leaders was gone.

Ten months later, in May 2018, all the new administration assignments were announced, including mine. We were going to have three new supervisors for all the elementary administrators. I was guided by informed hope with the feeling of being set up in the back of my

mind, but I was still excited about a change in leadership. Via email, I exchanged pleasantries with my new supervisor, Malita, to congratulate her on her new role. Once my transition to the new elementary school was made public a few days later, I met with the new staff individually or in small groups, whichever they preferred. I carried a small gray notebook to keep track of any patterns or trends that would aid me in building relationships and establishing foundational knowledge as the new school leader. I walked into my newly assigned school for my first visit.

Immediately, I was taken aback by the front foyer. This building floor plan was familiar and used by several of the elementary schools. What was different were the eight large, rounded faux brick columns painted bright royal blue, with silver painted at the top of each one. They matched the team colors of the former principal, Chad's favorite team. They made a loud statement. As I made my way over to the front office, I was welcomed by the office staff and other nearby staff members with open arms, a sense of joy, and warm laughter. The office manager opened the door to the principal's office, an odd diamond-shaped space with the walls painted the same bold blue. As the door swung open, my eyes fixed on a massive 63-inch television mounted on the wall of the small office. I asked a staff member why the television was there. She responded with annoyance that everyone else thought it was a tremendous eyesore but that Chad, the previous principal had insisted on having the television mounted on the wall so he could watch sports or the news. I didn't have much time to reflect further as I was about to engage in back-to-back meetings with the staff members, but silently, I wondered who had that much time to spend in their office.

The arrangement of the furniture in the principal's office did not allow space to meet with teams of teachers. The conference room was being used for end-of-year meetings. A sign-up list had been generated, and most of the staff members wanted to meet with me in small teams or

groups, so I found a space in the front office kitchenette where I could meet with my new staff members. After meeting with the first three groups, a pattern began to develop in the feedback about the school, its history, and the latest school principal's leadership. Almost every staff member expressed the trauma they experienced when they learned Chad lied to them about his affair with a staff member while his wife was battling cancer. It must have been much easier to conceal such an affair when he chose the windowless storage closet as his office instead.

Back in December 2017, word got out in the district and community that Chad had been put on leave indefinitely for engaging in this affair with a teacher at this school. Since then, the school has been under temporary leadership by Stewart, a former district assistant superintendent and Caroline, a retired district elementary school principal for the last five months before my arrival. Now that they knew I would replace Chad, the staff members were eager to ensure I was clear about all they had been through and how angry they were. They felt betrayed by Chad as a person, a leader, a husband, and a father. His daughter attended this school, and they were angry about the position he had put his child in because of his selfish decisions. The second thread that emerged was resentment toward a group of women that the principal pushed into leadership roles, often flippantly. Several teachers recalled not wanting to pass him in the hallway because he was known for impulsively telling a teacher that he had signed them up for a committee, asking them to complete a project, or giving them a job title right there in the hallway with no discussion. They would duck around a corner to avoid him if they saw him coming. It was in this way that he had formed a leadership team. With great hesitation, these women were thrown into a leadership role to carry out district initiatives. This small group was openly nicknamed "Chad's Bitches" with resentment on both sides. These women resented being placed in such leadership roles, and their peers resented their leadership. They expressed that Chad allowed such a toxic

culture due to his lack of leadership, leaving the female teachers to keep the building afloat. They felt they couldn't say no to his controlling tendencies. He would use school cameras to spy on staff members who went to work on the weekends. Staff members felt violated knowing their school leader would view camera footage and text them inquiring why they were in the building over the weekend. One female teacher summed it up by saying that they felt like they were constantly being watched and that they could not be trusted. Staff resented him for his overreach as a leader by using his power in ways that felt intimidating.

A few staff members recalled a story that eventually was well-known by the staff. Chad would engage in what they called "off-color" conversations with female staff members. One team did not feel comfortable sharing this information with me one-on-one, so they came in at the last meeting during my visit. They told me that Chad had told one, if not more, staff members what color of thong underwear might go best under the brand of leggings they were wearing. They shared this story to express that they felt they had been lacking building leadership for quite some time and were unsure what they were looking for in a new leader. However, they knew they did not want any more sexually harassing behavior from a school principal. Finally, the overarching theme from the staff was that because he had not demonstrated thoughtful leadership, the staff was in a state of trauma, anger, resentment, and anxiety. They felt overwhelmed knowing they were behind in all district initiatives. They stated they lacked access to professional development on learning resources and instructional practices for general and special education. They felt lost in our district equity work and felt they had been denied good feedback in the evaluation process.

Beyond the teaching staff, I could have private conversations with each of the temporary leaders of the school. My first conversation was with Stewart. With over 40 years of experience

in our district, Stewart expressed his concern with the state of the school and shared, “What I have seen that has been allowed to go on here has brought me to my knees.” He even contacted Jim, the now-retired superintendent who had used the N-word the year before, communicating his disappointment in Jim’s leadership that fostered a culture where male leaders like Chad could conduct themselves in such unprofessional ways.

I then met with the second temporary leader filling in for the school, Caroline, a retired elementary school principal with decades of leadership experience. The tone of her conversation with me was about her disappointment in Chad and how his behavior was a terrible stain on the beautiful reputation of the district. I asked if the staff members had communicated to her the same concerns as they had to me, and she confirmed they had. She said she had been assured they had been documented and addressed by human resources and the legal team. I took her word, but I was frustrated that nothing further would happen with these allegations.

August 2018 approached quickly, and Malita met with me for my first evaluation visit of the year. By then, I had removed the large television, swapped out the furniture, and painted the principal’s storage closet office a soft gray to make it more inviting for others. Malita had been in her new role for a few months now, and she was in the process of making site visits with all the elementary school principals she supervised. The visit included:

1. A building tour
2. A review of my goals per the evaluation rubric
3. A check-in on my needs
4. Words of support and good energy for the upcoming year

As we wrapped up, I asked how things were going for Malita in her new role. She shared that in the short time in her new role, she had witnessed a level of inefficiency and corruption at

the district level that she had not thought possible. Malita said she only needed two more years before considering retirement. She planned to keep her mouth shut and play the game, but she claimed she would no longer be quiet by her third year in the role. She expressed a desire to expose the many inequities she could not see. She expressed frustration that female leaders were held to a different standard than male leaders and that the men seemed to get away with everything. At the same time, the women generally were reassigned to follow behind them and had to clean up after them. She rattled off three male colleagues by name and spoke about how disgusted she was with their pathetic and ineffective leadership. One of these men was Chad, the former male principal I would have to clean up after this year. She vowed to support me and referenced “girl power” as the chant we would hail because she felt we could accomplish much this year together.

At Brookside Elementary, every system, structure, and committee had to be rebuilt. Our leadership team needed to be rebuilt with different staff members. Our Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) Committee needed support and guidance to help move the staff away from compliance practices and student shaming. Our Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) work needed to be revised, and the team wanted support looking at our practices through a culturally responsive lens. Our content liaisons needed support with professional development to support teachers in deepening their knowledge of content standards and pedagogy. The Equity Team needed time to process, gain confidence in the work, and develop a vision. Our August equity meeting was time spent getting to know each other and beginning to unpack the history of this team and our questions and hopes to help move us forward.

Nevertheless, what stood out at this initial Equity Team meeting was how deeply the staff felt traumatized by Chad’s equity leadership. Almost every person on the team had a story about

how he had schooled them in some way for having a blind spot in some area or during a racialized situation. They expressed that their time was mostly spent sitting around and listening to him talk about himself, brag about the books he supposedly read, and boast about what he knew about race relations. They felt intimidated by his approach and wanted to be treated with respect going forward. Point taken. I shared with the team that we could take the time to work through concerns and build capacity before asking them to take on specific leadership roles. This year could be about building relationships and trust, learning, and offering transparency to the staff on our journey while holding sacred space to have brave conversations. I could feel a deep level of trepidation in the room among the adults. I didn't realize the same emotions were getting stirred up in our students.

I didn't know it then, but at the beginning of the year, a parent had reached out to a classroom teacher about a recess concern. The student loved to take pencils and paper to sketch under a shade tree at recess. During recess, other students would encroach under the shade tree, trampling the area and causing a small scene. When the student reported the concern to the classroom teacher, she told the child that art supplies could not be taken to recess. The student shared the message with her parents, and the mother emailed the teacher, who responded, "Mrs. Toliver doesn't allow students to take art supplies out to recess." The parent then reached out to me for clarification.

I was unaware my name had been weaponized as the school leader regarding art supplies! Goodness. I spoke to the student and saw the same delicateness in her worry about her art supplies. Not okay. I spoke with both parents, and we had a lengthy conversation that initially covered the concerns about the art supplies but expanded to some shared thinking about ways to infuse more culturally responsive practices into our efforts to connect with the school

community. These parents appreciated my quick response and openness to foster a more inclusive community for marginalized student groups.

A few weeks later, a second scenario surfaced where my voice as principal was weaponized without my knowledge. Previously, there was a tradition of hosting game nights on Saturday evenings over the school year. However, the staff had given feedback to one of the two interim principals, Caroline, that if families wanted more staff participation, school nights would be better for such events. However, when the PTCO President spoke to the district PTCO liaison she told her that Chris Toliver forbade weekend events. This feedback got back to me through my supervisor, Malita. I confirmed for her that this shift to weeknights came at the request of the staff, so she willingly communicated the same message to the PTCO. The PTCO member sheepishly expressed to me that she had been confused but had difficulty accepting that the staff had requested a change to these events. Anytime there was a discrepancy regarding my next leadership move that ran contrary to what Chad had done, I was questioned.

After realizing my transgressions against Crystal, the assistant principal from Sycamore Elementary, I had begun an intentional journey of mentorship and reading to learn more about systems and structures of racism, my role in institutionalized racism in the past, and to better approach the dehumanizing experiences my son was experiencing in a system. From my mentor, I was given specific peer-reviewed literature to read and a rigorous space for reflection and ownership as long as I took the opportunity for growth seriously. I appreciate the space I was given through mentorship to learn and grow before starting graduate work. The same dignity I was learning to ensure others experienced was offered to me during deep reflective collaboration with thought partners who furthered my understanding of critical race theory, racial realism, and white racial frames. I was beginning to see things through a different and more distinct lens. I

felt my perceptions change about the district. I began applying what I was beginning to understand about systemic racism to my experiences as a mom and school leader. I began to realize the sacred space given to me to process my thoughts, ask questions, get angry or sad, and express gratitude. The more I engaged in the mentorship process, the more I wanted to ensure that I would commit to affording others the same dignity. I was learning the futility of reforming others while simultaneously realizing my own evolution as I slowly continued to grow in the development my white racial frame. I could read all the articles and books I wanted, but I needed someone to talk to about what I was trying to learn to internalize these critical concepts and move to application. The more I could practice synthesizing my thoughts into words and writing, the more secure I became in the knowledge I was slowly gaining. I was becoming increasingly aware of the beliefs I once held and the harm I had caused over the years. I could only hope I was learning who I used to be so I could begin to cause less harm and be a warning to others not to be like I had once been. I was feeling exposed and vulnerable but committed to continuing the journey. I felt supported in my work as a building leader in my new assignment, but I have always had a gut instinct about certain things, and I was beginning to wonder how long the support would last. I was finding my voice.

One of the first moves I made to start expressing my voice was to partner with a family who had come forward with concerns about culturally responsive practices and resources at the school. We agreed that a valid next step would be to form a decision-making committee to review a questionable book series in our school library. We discussed the consensus process I would follow and determined a meeting date. Malita shared that she would alert her supervisor, Stephanie about the upcoming meeting. I intended to include key educators and the parents who brought forward the concern. Two classroom teachers, a reading technician, a reading

interventionist, and another teacher expressed interest in the process. I met with the four staff members to contextualize our purpose and answer any questions about why we were coming together. Other than the reading technician, the three teachers had never heard of the Board policy for this process. I felt comfortable explaining the policy and the racialized tones involved. However, it was also a lot of tender ground to cover early in the school year, early in my leadership at this school, and early in my relationships with my staff members. I was nervous about those factors, but I also knew engaging with the family was the proper process.

A few days later, I received feedback from a key staff member about the book series.

In short, she offered no conclusion because she was conflicted. She would not be sad to see those books go, but she also did not want to start down the road of book banning. Our Equity Team was still getting to know one another, building relationships rooted in trust. I knew how they felt about conversations about race in the past, leaving a clear message that, as their new building leader, I must tread lightly. Simultaneously, I had parents of Black students contacting me about previous practices with discipline, their children's special service plans, and racist treatment by teachers. I was already in this dichotomous position, needing to respond quickly to the needs and concerns of parents in the community while walking alongside the staff at a pace that enabled me to build trust, especially in race. Likewise, I was living this journey as a parent requesting my son not be required to read certain novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a part of his high school curriculum.

The challenge of navigating the request for possibly removing a book series from our school library fell into a delicate space, considering I was also speaking out on a literacy committee against a weak and undignified literacy resource the district wanted to purchase. At our next Equity Team meeting, I knew we had to address this decision-making committee

reviewing a questionable book series in our school library. I was more than comfortable engaging in this conversation with our staff, and I also knew they were not ready for it. Many questions surfaced. What was wrong with the book series? Why is it considered offensive? How did this get brought to your attention? What does district policy say about something like this? Has this been done before? What is the process? What happens if this comes up again? The Equity Team shared emotions ranging from the shock of having no idea this could be a thing to gratitude for having a new understanding of a perspective they hadn't held before this conversation. It was also made clear by the team that we needed to go whole-staff with this conversation. Transparency was imperative, and they did not feel equipped to deliver the message. So, I did at the next staff meeting, keeping the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in mind. Soon after, our decision-making committee met about the book series in question.

I had created a loose agenda that included developing norms for our discussion, reviewing Board policy, ensuring all voices would be heard, and a plan for reaching consensus. The parents who addressed the concern were in attendance, three classroom teachers, and the reading interventionist. The Latino father and White mother were met with four White female educators as I joined everyone at the long oval conference table. As a White woman married to a Black man and a mom to our Black son, the racialized optics of these gatherings always caught my eye. There was always an internal scripted question in my head about how I would sustain the dignity of each person in the room. We made introductions, set norms, and received immense gratitude from the parents. We reviewed Board policy and reviewed the process for considering the inclusion or exclusion of book titles. We gave the floor to the parents to share their positions

and reasoning behind the request to remove the book series. I took notes and listed plusses and deltas as they emerged in conversation.

The tone in the conference room was bright, and attendees were engaged as the parents presented their position. They used research to share their fears about the book series with White students who could weaponize a discriminatory representation of the Spanish language within the text to humiliate students like their children. They did not want any student to be dehumanized by using or receiving the language they deemed offensive in these books. The father shared how a neighboring school district had responded to this book series and its subsequent removal.

Each staff member at the table then weighed in and shared their perspective. One staff member who had held different literacy roles in the district before this assignment was versed in the history and research in favor of removing the series from elementary schools. Her position aligned with the parents. The three classroom teachers seemed shocked, concerned, and interested in the discussion as we went around the table. One teacher said she had been oblivious about the book series even existing, much less the controversy surrounding it. The two other teachers chimed in that they had also been oblivious.

Questions emerged from the three White classroom teachers. A broader historical conversation about systemic racism in education emerged. The parents shared their viewpoints, what history and research had taught them, and their own experiences as an interracial family. I jotted down applicable anecdotes as the group engaged in conversation. The teachers seemed floored by what they were learning and hearing yet open to this new perspective they had never previously considered. One of the teachers mentioned her white privilege and awareness of needing to think beyond her own experiences, but she did not know how to proceed.

We eventually reached a place in the discussion to review our notes, and suddenly, each committee member softly, yet with purpose, verbalized that she favored removing the book series from circulation at this school. I sat in stillness and gave the room some wait time. I worried a decision was being made from a white savior mentality rather than from a depth of theoretical insight about what this decision meant going forward. I also knew the parents knew the offensive book series had no place in our library or classroom circulations. The silence turned into smiles around the room. A decision was made. The books would be removed. Now what? We returned to the policy to determine the next steps and a timeline. The group felt the book series did not honor these policy points:

1. Offer materials representative of the school community and other religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political groups.
2. Place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in selecting materials of the highest quality to assure a comprehensive collection appropriate for the users of the library media center.

Therefore, the committee felt the book series should be removed based on these two points:

1. Inappropriate content for the maturity of the intended audience
2. Inaccurate or out-of-date content

I shared with the committee that our next step would be me crafting a summary report of the recommendation to remove the book series reached by the group's consensus. I would present this recommendation to Malita. We want to communicate this change with the school staff and remove the titles from circulation. The meeting adjourned pleasantly.

Once the meeting concluded, I headed to our elementary principal meeting for the rest of the day. When I arrived, the group was on a break. I put my things down, looked around the room, and greeted those nearby. Malita was in conversation with a colleague of ours and waved me over to join them. When I approached, she asked me how the meeting went regarding the book series. I was filling her in when one of our other elementary supervisors, a White male, approached our small circle of three. I continued my summary of the meeting, and the male supervisor commented that he had heard a bit about this parent's request to remove a book series in my school community. Malita widened the conversation to include the K-12 literacy concern she was seeing and said, "Chris, tell him what's going on with your son."

This male supervisor had been one of the administrators at our son's school for a short time. My husband was not fond of him then, so I was reluctant to share anything. I gave a shortened version of what was going on with our son's experience with the canon of literature and the culturally responsive instructional capacity of the teachers at our son's high school. I shared a bit about how we were navigating the conversation with the school and my husband's disdain for the situation. The male supervisor retorted, "Why is your husband even frustrated? Like, come on, he should know better, man." Instantly, I felt heat in my neck and face, and with this visceral reaction to the comment from this mediocre White male, almost cutting him off, I snapped, "You do not get to say that! You do not get to say how my husband should react to this situation with our son." In a tone that suggested my reaction was overly sensitive, he condescendingly responded, "Now, I didn't mean it that way, Chris."

I felt he had meant that my husband should not feel surprised that these racialized challenges exist in our schools and that he should resign to accepting them as much as they may suck. I pushed back on the condescension in his voice by looking him directly in the eye and

firmly stating, “As a Black male, father to our Black son, my husband is clear on where he stands on issues around race in our school systems, and that our son should always be able to stand in his dignity. It is not that his Dad is frustrated. It is not that he is surprised. It is because he does know better; in this case, he knows better than any of us what his son needs and deserves.” The male supervisor again attempted to claim he didn’t mean anything by his comment. The third colleague in the circle remained silent throughout this entire exchange. Malita responded that she completely understood what I was saying, as a Latina mother herself, and shifted the conversation back to discussing steps for a meeting to review the book series across all our elementary schools. We were soon called back as a group to resume our elementary principal meeting.

A few days later, Malita told me she had approached our district superintendent about what was happening with my son. She had taken liberties with our son’s story to demonstrate that this was not just at the elementary level. She said she was “shocked” that our high school students were still reading books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. She wanted to take on the challenge of engaging in a district conversation in which we would reflect on being culturally responsive and what it means to honor our dedication to inclusive excellence. “I hope that’s okay that I told our superintendent about your son, Chris. But, I mean, this really is a K-12 issue.” I felt my chest rise and fall as I exhaled soundlessly in aggravation. How dare she capitalize on my son’s story without knowing all the facts? The only reason I told her is that I learned long ago that your immediate supervisor should know any movements you may need to make personally as a parent in the district. It’s best to keep them in the loop. Best they hear it from you. Especially if you were a woman. I knew her new passion project would not be advanced, or if it did, it wouldn’t go well. Soon after, a meeting with

district library personnel was arranged by my supervisor in response to the thoughtful process we had completed that led to the removal of the offensive book series at my school. Malita believed there was a need for a more significant conversation on systems we may lack for reviewing and removing offensive books from students. She was glad these books were removed from my school's library, but she was sure they existed in all the other elementary school libraries.

By the next Equity Team meeting, our conversations had moved from removing the book series to asking questions or sharing experiences focused on culturally responsive practices. Most elementary schools had engaged in some level of work with district liaison support, but the range of that work was extensive. By October, I had arranged for one of our district DEI coordinators to join our team meeting to begin a partnership with us. I laid out the options we could partake in to advance our knowledge as an Equity Team. This timing aligned with conversations about classroom party traditions and themes, inclusivity, and moving forward more culturally responsively. One of the team members asked the coordinator for her perspective on holiday celebrations. Not long ago, Thanksgiving classroom lessons were still in place at this school, with students donning headdresses and at least one teacher dressing up as a pilgrim, joking that she had scared some of the younger students uncertain about her costume. Holiday parties were still Christmas-themed, with craft fairs that included a guest dressed up as Santa, Christmas crafts, and Christmas carols as early as two years prior. These events were upcoming, and the team felt out of the loop regarding district expectations and wanted insight. The district coordinator and I tag-teamed to fill in gaps, answer questions, and share stories and district memorandums outlining how times had changed. A few teachers on the committee seemed aware of more inclusive practices, sharing ways they had changed their instruction or their class parties. Overall, the team wanted to continue to learn more.

Each step of the way, I tried to reassure the team that I was learning alongside them, and in these conversations, I saw myself as a colleague in collaboration with them as we grew in our knowledge. Invariably, someone would ask a question about my perspective as a White parent of a son who identified as Black, married to his Black father. I always had to deeply reflect on what the purpose would be for me to share that more personal perspective, cautiously riding the line between being a transparent, open, and vulnerable educator and knowing when to hold back, refrain from taking up space in the conversation, and honestly sustain a private and protective stance for my family.

I often thought about how Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine educators did not have the luxury of hiding their perspectives. It should not be up to them to coach and mentor White educators through conversations on race. As White accomplices, we needed to join them in conversation. I also thought about two conversations I had with two colleagues who identified as gay males. Each shared that he was often cautious about when and with whom he would share his sexual identity. Although it is inhumane for them to have even consider being cautious, they felt they could retain control of this disclosure. I did not often feel the same in my building situations. My husband and son would occasionally visit the building, join me for an event, or drop off something for me. When it came to my engagement with district colleagues, few knew about the racial makeup of my family. Sometimes, this led to some situations where White colleagues made ignorant comments that exposed their racial blind spots. So, I was constantly weighing a lot before I spoke. How do I best refrain from my family experience being centered in these conversations while knowing there was often a weird fascination — “Well, what do *you* think, Chris?” All I knew was my perspective and lived experience. There is danger in others walking away assuming that one person’s perspective is doctrine. “Well, Chris is married to a

Black man, and she said...” However, the work we needed to do as an Equity Team and staff was moving at a glacial pace considering the urgency of what the students needed, what the Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine parents were asking, what was equitable, and, in some cases, what was not illegal.

I was also continuing my private journey as an accomplice to try and disrupt systems and structures of racism as a building leader, parent, and wife. I had also been on an interesting journey with one White colleague. We were fast friends when our kids were young. I was rearing a Black son, and she was rearing a White daughter. If I shared anything about my family, she would always listen, but there were times during group meetings when I felt she put my voice on display. She would mention my name in these group settings and recall a story I told her that helped her see a different racial perspective. Once, this resulted in a microphone being planted in my hands to retell an experience I had with my son in preschool years ago, where he was the only child of color in the room. I gently interacted with a group of four-year-old children lovingly to help celebrate the diversity in the room so they might stop scratching my son’s skin and pulling his curls out of toddler curiosity. I wanted them to see how each child in the room was beautiful and unique.

Over time, these encounters between her and I went to private text messages between us. She would converse with me privately through text messages, but publicly, she remained silent, especially when her voice would have added value to a conversation or decision-making process as an elementary school leader. She asked for resources to read or other tools to further her learning but never followed up on any of them.

I continued to engage in these conversations until February of 2021. So much happened between the fall of 2018 and the spring of 2021. However, the most traumatizing event occurred

during the beginning months of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of police brutality beneath the knee of Derek Chauvin. This colleague was not the only one reaching out to me privately during those days, weeks, and months after Mr. Floyd's murder. Women of all races were reaching out, old and new, colleagues and friends. Specifically, Black women told me they found a haven to vent, cry, scream, and rage at the dehumanizing actions of White people, specifically the audacity of White women summarized in the name of "Karen" behaviors. White women, friends, family members, and colleagues reached out to seek guidance and resources to expand their knowledge on systemic racism and to ask what they could do to help. I could not imagine the burden on my Black friends and colleagues during this time. Incident after incident of racial injustice and police brutality continued following George Floyd's murder, through a dark summer, into the fall, and into the spring of 2021. Among others, Daunte Wright, Raychard Brooks, Casey Goodson, Jr., Andre Hill, Fanta Bility, and Winston Smith, Jr. were also murdered by police. Relentless private text conversations with this colleague intensified after George Floyd's murder, but she never used her voice publicly. After years of text dialogue with this colleague, during this horrific time in our country's history, I received an off-the-cuff text from her. She shared with me an upcoming purchase she intended to make, a gangster rap t-shirt because the music genre had been the thing that had gotten her through the last nine months. I chose to disengage.

Often, conversations of race surface, most specifically with Black friends and colleagues who stop by, come for a meal, or share resources. One day in the fall of 2018, I conversed with two Black friends. We discussed everything from school district events and incidents in the media to things going on in our personal lives. The question that stands out from that conversation stems from the dialogue around interracial marriages. One woman in the room was

a Black woman married to a Black man. The other was a Black woman married to a White man. I was a White woman married to a Black man. We discussed the places where similarities, differences, and challenges of a Black couple and an interracial couple might intersect and what sets them apart. The following question surfaced: “Can a spouse be their full, unapologetic, and authentic self in an interracial marriage?” The person asking this question was a Black woman married to a White man. We never did answer the question. I read Fanon’s (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks* shortly after that conversation.

Although I am highly simplifying, I would argue that Fanon (2008) would say one cannot fully be oneself in an interracial marriage. In pieces, Fanon (2008) expresses that a Black man is either confronting his race and all the history, responsibility, and pain associated with who he is, or he is a Black man who seeks to be with a White woman out of self-hatred, a thirst for revenge or an escape from oppression. Likewise, Fanon (2008) offers that a White man may love a Black woman, but he will never fully respect her. Does a White woman marry a Black man out of pity or for love? Fanon (2008) is less clear on this as the book is written from the perspective of a Black man. This book gave me pause to continue to reflect on the layers of my marriage to a Black man. Was I seeking similar validation in my personal life? Was I striving for validation in my professional role?

My response to any situation was being monitored, and I needed to ensure that the staff felt heard and could see a quick response from me. However, the staff’s post-traumatic stress continued to resurface. The lack of empathy and response from the previous principal continually reemerged. I felt like I was always walking a tightrope of trying to move the staff forward emotionally while always giving space for them to continue processing these unresolved emotions. With every month that passed, all the traditional decisions that needed to be made,

from approving a small purchase to determining the next step we needed to take as a staff through the lens of equity, were tainted by the legacy of the previous principal. I had to think almost as if I were him and then thoughtfully pivot toward a new outcome. Sometimes, these were grand gestures of change and other times, I dared not stray too far from the tightrope I was walking. Female leadership was hitting differently.

One area that often felt different as a female principal was when a situation arose where I needed to address the actions of a male teacher. A few months back, a parent of a Black male child reached out to me because she felt her son's two grade-level teachers were conferring with her son in public in class, leaving him feeling humiliated. The family felt the homeroom teacher, instead of being empathic and responsive, assumed their son was lazy and unmotivated. The teacher said all the right things to apologize, but the chemistry between teacher and student was still an issue.

I had a parent of another Black male student reach out with a similar concern about the same teacher. I always listened to the teacher's side of the story, but once again, I invited the parent in, and the teacher walked through the same restorative conversation with this second parent and student. Upon the conclusion of this meeting, the teacher and I spoke privately. The teacher was concerned about how he was being perceived. I asked him to reflect, not for me, but for himself, on the disconnect resulting in two Black male students feeling dehumanized in his presence. How does he want these students to feel in the classroom or during tutoring? What strengths and interests do each of these students possess? What steps could he take to build a relationship with these students? How will he know he has made a more profound connection? I felt like I was speaking to a used car salesman who wanted to try and posture and tell me what he

thought I wanted to hear with no intention of making any changes in his classroom or within himself.

The relationship between this male teacher and the first Black male student remained unstable, and the issue was further developing between him and the second Black male student. I received calls from each of these boys' parents wanting further support. I had intended to make it down to this classroom once students were dismissed, but this teacher departed right after the students were dismissed each day. I felt like I was walking on eggshells with this guy and did not want time to lapse in communication over the weekend, so I crafted an email for documentation purposes to state the facts, ask for his side of the story, and secure a time to meet with each family.

Once again, we set up conferences, one with each mother, and once again, this teacher listened and gave empty, inauthentic promises. It pained me to watch these moms drink in his words when I knew they were just slick sentences he put together to temporarily appease each family, knowing he would walk down the hall and talk shit about these families to his teammates. These teachers act one way in front of parents and then go back to class, continue the same dehumanizing behaviors, and gaslight the students into believing their lack of success in the classroom is inherently their fault.

The second Black student had experienced trauma twice in the last year, and we were concerned that he had qualified for an IEP without any thought to his situational trauma. Jocelyn or I would often support his transition into the building every morning. He stated that several staff members triggered him. However, one of these staff members would often try to intervene or support him, not reading the situational cues, talking too much, making false promises, and ultimately threatening to call the police, a direct trigger. This day, he was triggered again by this

same staff member. By the time I was alerted to the situation, he had escalated to the point where the safest thing to do was wait it out with him in the school library, where he was running back and forth. The feeling of intolerance from the staff was palpable that day while the library was temporarily unavailable as we worked to meet the needs of this student.

Jocelyn joined me, and we waited it out. He de-escalated, and we brought his mom in to help problem solve. His mom felt compelled to remind us always to avoid calling the police on her son. We assured her that a few new staff members, including me, had a high tolerance for waiting things out with students and reassured her that she would always be the first point of contact as a partner to support her son. Rarely, in cases of actual safety, would we need to escalate a situation to involve law enforcement. What was becoming increasingly evident with this Black male child were the adult behaviors manifesting a response in him rather than a manifestation of any disability. The parent was trusting of us but was completely jaded about the school and district's supposed focus on racial equity, so we had to work hard at maintaining her trust in our own way, not by the district's design.

There was a long history with even the parent partnership prong of the equity work by this point. Our district had partnered with a consulting group focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion since 2005. The consultants hosted district training focused on courageous conversations about race. The student component involved creating safe affinity spaces for students of color and equity walk-through events using rubrics to offer schools feedback on the racial and culturally responsive landscape that was evident or not during site visits. The parent component required each school to offer a venue for parents of color to have a safe space to collaborate with their child(ren) 's educators and administration team to dismantle oppressive systems and structures to afford learning environments that supported students of color and all

students, to be academically successful. Our own experience as parents attending these gatherings at our son's elementary school left us feeling like they were data meetings that pointed out the opportunity gap of marginalized students in a way that blamed the students for their performance. We felt we were brought in to advise the school on working together to motivate Black students like our son. We quit attending.

As an administrator, I had to sterilize my opinions and experiences to regurgitate the district brand's perspective. These parent meetings were just shiny objects we dangled in front of parents as a distraction. I do believe that particular schools in the district had success, but I cannot name one district policy that had changed because of our equity work. Nevertheless, we weaponized the topic of diversity when we were attempting to determine causes and solutions for inequities in our schools.

Our parent equity meetings left our school district's internal values, norms, and beliefs intact. Since I did not see an institutional shift, I kept working on myself and my growth, which included how I interacted with all families. As a result, one parent joined us for crosswalk duty, another parent was willing to join our Innovation Team, and a third parent was willing to attend a meeting about student safety, about which she initially had reservations. One family initiated a conversation that led to removing the book series from our library, which was seen as racially insensitive in the wrong hands. However, my perceptions about how my leadership may have been encouraging for these parents, I recognize my reflection is rooted in my white racial frame which is filled with racial blind spots.

Because I wanted to continue filling my racial blind spots, I continued reading and seeking mentorship. As I read the *Derrick Bell Reader* (2005), my mind began to comprehend the depth and breadth of the permanence of racism. I began to understand what it meant to look

at things through the lens of critical realism. This book changed me, as did each book I read thereafter. Having opportunities to engage in dialogue with peers helped me grow. It forced me to put my thoughts into my own words and make sense of concepts I had read across multiple authors rooted in CRT and CWS. Reading was an imperative learning tool for me. I cannot physically, mentally, or emotionally have the same experiences as Black, Indigenous, or Hispanic/Latine groups. I can have empathy. I can gain clarity. I can seek counsel. I can believe.

One of those incredible moments of belief occurred early in my journey in April of 2017 when I experienced a visceral reaction while reading *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Are Middle-Class Blacks Angry? Why Should America Care?* by Ellis Cose (1993). Cose (1993) examined the permanence of racism and how discrimination against even middle-class Blacks left the American dream still a deferred dream. I had just completed the Derrick Bell Reader with a slight understanding of the permanence of racism, the legal origins of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and the connection of the theory to the field of education. Great! Fabulous! Let's dig in! The author clarified that racial discrimination was not rooted in malicious intent. It comes from what White folks do naturally day-to-day, lacking empathy in the realization that daily microaggressions can be soul-crushing to a Black person. Cose (1993) shared research and vignettes to illustrate these devastatingly harmful moments that never allow Black people to relax, not knowing where the next insult or slight will occur.

And then I turned to page forty-one, where Isabella Wilkerson, Chicago bureau chief for the New York Times, recounted a story. She shared her lived reality of constantly feeling reduced to a third-class citizen while also living the dual reality of needing to operate daily with a smile, dealing with one thing and then another repeatedly in a state of permanent vulnerability. She was asked to offer a specific example and launched into this incident:

Once, upon arriving at the airport in Detroit, she found that she was running late for an interview. She raced through the terminal and was about to hop aboard an Avis bus when a man and a woman, both white, ran up behind her, announced they were with the Drug Enforcement Administration, and demanded that she step aside. She told them she couldn't afford to miss the bus, so they climbed on and watched her every move. Initially, she was 'astonished and in kind of a daze' as it sunk in that she was suspected of carrying drugs. However, she was not too dazed to notice that she was the only black person on the bus. As the agents stared at her, she grew angry and intensely embarrassed. 'There was no reason for them to stop me except [that] I was Black.' When they interrogated her, she took out her notepad and 'ended up trying to do a little reverse psychology.' She started asking them questions, primarily to help her keep her presence of mind. Still, as she realized the entire bus was staring, humiliation washed over her, and she wondered whether rape could be much worse.

I threw the book to the ground and felt a hot sting laser up my forearms. I remember reading that last sentence and suddenly throwing the book to the floor as I felt my arms prickle, my eyes sting, my throat tighten, my jaw clench, and my stomach twisted in a visceral response to the last eight words. I felt nauseous and dizzy. I began pacing in my bedroom, shaking my arms to release the hot sting I was feeling. I bent over. I stood back up. I took deep breaths in and out. I paced some more. I knew I would need a minute before I could read more.

I did not know exactly how it felt to be Ms. Wilkerson then. However, I did know what it felt like to be raped. I had survived being raped at gunpoint in March of 1991 as an 18-year-old high school senior. The assault had shaped me, but it did not fully define me. Nevertheless, twenty-six years later, I read her words on page forty-one. Everything I thought I may have understood about the impact of racism changed with that sentence. The empathy and fury

unleashed in me could no longer be contained. I could never say I fully understood, but I believed her. I believed every syllable Ms. Wilkerson shared from that moment. Woman to woman, I understood something. I could empathize with the word she chose to express the depth of dehumanization she felt in that Avis shuttle bus and I believed her. I could relate to the dazed feeling she described. I remember sitting with a detective for hours on April 4, 1991, as he completed a composite sketch of the monster that had violated me.

I can still remember how overwhelmed, weirdly ashamed, and embarrassed I felt as the knowledge of my sexual assault became public in the local newspaper. In what felt like a slow-motion experience, I can still recall curious stares in my direction, the slight breeze that would roll over my skin as my peers briskly passed me in the high school halls, and the way I would try to blur my vision so I did not have to look at anyone. I wanted to hold my head high, but sometimes it was more effortless to look down and adjust the bag on my shoulder for the tenth time to avoid eye contact, counting my steps as I walked to my next class. I was in a daze, going through the motions daily for weeks and months. I could relate to the alertness Ms. Wilkerson felt she had to sustain. Nowhere felt safe for me to go. I could not relate to her realization of being the only Black person on the shuttle. I could relate to being the only person I knew in my family, neighborhood, circle of friends, and life who was a rape survivor. And the smile. I could deeply relate to the mask of a smile a humiliated and traumatized female feels she must keep plastered upon her face to keep everyone else comfortable and at ease. The nightmares were relentless for quite some time. No one else could handle my truth. Sometimes, I couldn't either. The rape I had survived contributed to the ending of my parents' marriage. All I had was the energy to go through the motions as I moved my siblings out of the home, drove them back and

forth to school, stayed with family and friends, and tried to finish high school while our parents determined the dissolution of their marriage.

Six years later, in 1997, when I was about 25 years-old, I encountered two police officers who also profoundly impacted me. I was driving home around 9:00 p.m., sitting about three cars back at a red light. Suddenly, I saw the red and blue lights of a police car and heard the whoop of the siren behind my red Chevy S10 Blazer. The officer's cruiser was inches from my back bumper. The light turned green, and I turned right and took an immediate second right into an apartment complex parking lot. The police cruiser pulled behind me, blocking me in the parking space. One officer approached me on the driver's side, the other on the passenger side while holding a flashlight. My hands were on the steering wheel. I turned to the officer on my left, waiting for directions. He asked for my license, registration, and insurance verification. I leaned toward the glove box on the passenger side, and suddenly, these officers were screaming at me to put my hands back on the wheel. I frantically looked back and forth at each officer, who now had their guns drawn, pleading to tell me what they wanted me to do. I was told to keep my left hand on the wheel and to slowly use my right hand to open the glove box and retrieve the requested items, then slowly use my right hand to press the passenger window button to lower the window and hand my documents to the officer on the passenger side. He then returned to the cruiser to run my information while the other officer remained outside my door, his gun still in my direction.

After an eternity, the second officer returned to my driver's side. He apologized for interrupting my evening, saying this was a situation of mistaken identity. A White girl with a similar profile and vehicle had just murdered her mother; I fit the initial description. He returned my documents to me, and they apologized, walked back to their cruiser, backed out, and drove

off, leaving me completely rattled. I was not around guns often, so this incident brought out some of my rape trauma from 1991. My proof of insurance and vehicle registration are never in the passenger-side glove box. Three years later, I was dating my future husband, and I remember the first time he came home when we were dating, and he told me he had been pulled over by a cop who gave him an attitude that he felt was racially motivated. I believed him. I drew empathy from my own one-time experience and tried to consider how he might be feeling. Moreover, when he came home a second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth time during our relationship and told me it had happened again, I empathized with how he must be feeling. He has never been pulled over with me in the car, but he has been pulled over more than once when our son was in the car.

It wasn't lost on me that Ms. Wilkerson was not a survivor of rape. I could see how others might hold that against her sentiment and choice to use the word "rape" to be able to convey the depth of emotion she was feeling at that moment. I drew the exact parallel with the incident I experienced with the two police officers. My awakening in that moment was also about empathy and humanity. I could see how other White people might conclude from a similar experience that race is not a factor in a confrontation between Black men and police officers. This scenario happened to me only once. I left that experience feeling empathy, making it easy to believe Black men when they say race plays a role in their encounter with a police officer. I believe them. I believe my husband. I believe my son. And I believe Isabella Wilkerson.

Meanwhile, I struggled to empathize with the traditional parties the prominent White parent community wanted to hold onto again this year. One of the volunteer moms had sent out an email regarding February holiday parties, which triggered a list of about twelve specific items these parents wanted to discuss with me, things the previous principal would have addressed differently than me. Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Easter were a big deal at Brookside

Elementary. Multiple perspectives were not. I wondered why these parents could look away from the previous principal's gross transgressions against his wife but not give up their reindeer games and conversation heart candy. If I had to summarize the list now, I would probably rename this list "Karen's List of Concerns Rooted in White Supremacy." The first items on the list focused on community events and the themes they could and could not have, concerns about classroom behaviors of other children, not theirs, and what I planned to do about it. We also discussed the white supremacy "OK" hand gesture their child flashed multiple times while conversing about a Whites-only bathroom in front of Black students and how their child could not possibly know what that meant or what he was saying. They wanted to make sure I was clear that if their child felt threatened, they had given their child permission to "punch the shit out of" the other child. Finally, I was not allowed to investigate anything involving their child unless one of them was present or on speaker phone. The previous principal loved their child, and they never had any problems before I came.

There is a fine line here to maintain a stance of humility and patience, knowing there is district policy on your side but also knowing you must pick and choose your battles. You can undoubtedly tell parents about district policy, allowing you much room here. However, ultimately, I asked the parents what they wanted to happen and then brought in the student to clarify what their child needed to feel safe going forward. In these circumstances, based on leadership experience, I knew other behaviors would eventually surface later with this student, but students tend to lay low for a while. This student chose to lay low for a while. I had no doubt this couple left my office and let their circle of friends know they had let me have it.

I had been trying to ease into conversations around the traditions that continued to be upheld in this community. Related to the monthly celebrations of marginalized groups, I wanted

to gently start normalizing staff awareness around these critical monthly acknowledgments. I continued adding calendar acknowledgments in my weekly memos to staff throughout the year. Insisting on multiple perspectives, races, and cultures should be an everyday practice in our instruction, learning experiences, and conversations, not just relegated to one month out of the year. I shared with staff that I was always available for conversations or reflection, as there is no specific way to navigate such important waters, but the best work we can do is within ourselves. Some questions I asked staff to reflect upon concerning the learning experiences we provide our students included:

1. What is the purpose of this activity/resource/learning experience I am providing my students?
2. How do I want my students to feel as a result?
3. Whose perspective is present in the learning experience?
4. Whose perspective is missing?
5. How are you ensuring the dignity and pride of all students because of the learning experience?

In a similar capacity, I had been participating on a literacy advisory team for over a year. Our charge had been to research several literacy resources already pre-selected by a few district literacy coordinators and finalize a decision for a resource purchase that would cost about \$10 million. We reviewed several vendor presentations and used a pre-selected rubric to narrow down to two resources, which felt contrived. We listened to each vendor's pitch, rated the resource on the provided rubric, held discussions, and narrowed the six options to two. Once we got the materials, I vetted them with a trusted colleague. Upon review, I emailed district leadership to express my concern that the options they were considering were deeply

dehumanizing for students and cited 88 examples of deficit language and practices in the scripted resource. Three others also spoke up, and the literacy committee was soon disbanded, and the resources were never purchased.

Word got out to the staff about my position on the literacy resources and my support of Jocelyn while my stance as a parent was coming to light at the district level. An alliance formed between several White staff members and an influential group of White parents. The staff members fed the community members bits of information, and the parents began crafting emails directly to me, my supervisor, and sometimes even the Board of the school district. One classroom was experiencing a string of long-term substitute teachers the entire year because of a personnel challenge that could not be shared with the community. The issue with revolving substitute teachers was a catalyst for staff members to vent to the community about how they felt burdened by this unfortunate circumstance involving one of their own colleagues. This incident made the parents overly concerned with their favorite teachers becoming unhappy and overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, the special services team was still reeling after the team conversation focused on Jocelyn's experience with racial mobbing from colleagues and community members. The trust had been broken, and a pocket of parents continued their relentless pursuits to discredit Jocelyn at every turn. All these elements contributed to a larger narrative that was starting to build in the community, and these influential pockets of vocal White parents were pressing in on the building. Emails were sent. Meetings were scheduled. Conversations were had with every single family who wanted to see me. These parents felt that, according to their favorite teachers, the school building was filled with tension. They felt I needed to increase my presence like the previous principal. They had heard a rumor that I had pushed out a staff member. They thought I

had canceled awards assemblies or stopped holiday parties because the staff was too afraid to be honest with their community. The narratives each of these families heard stemmed from internal staff dynamics between two grade levels with opposing views on holiday parties and award ceremonies. If only these parents knew how hard I was trying to help their school! I invited all these parents to my office individually, and I spent about ninety minutes together with each family so that I could answer each of their questions. They came in friendly enough, and we reviewed their entire email together. It is a delicate terrain to be transparent without exposing some growing pains of making new traditions based on staff and parent feedback.

Regarding the personnel challenge I could not share with the community, I explained to parents that these decisions lived at a different level than the building level, with our HR department. Throughout the conversation, it was revealed that Chad made it seem like he had much more jurisdiction over personnel issues than he did. I was exhausted, mostly screaming to myself, "He lied to you!" They loved the essence of their former leader, so calling Chad a liar in public was not a professional look. As we finished reviewing the parents' concerns, I asked them how they were feeling and how they would like me to remain in communication going forward. By the time the parents left, we were laughing together, and they seemed comfortable with the bigger picture and apologized for not reading the newsletters. They expressed that they had a better understanding, and in the future, they felt more than comfortable contacting me.

I knew I should let Malita know where things stood. She and I would often text as needed in generalities. I let her know I had met with these parents and shared that she had no doubt I could continue to win over families one ninety-minute conversation at a time. The wording of the narratives these families were bringing forward was similar to each other, and I let her know these parent conversations were being orchestrated. She reminded me that teachers could be

significant assets in controlling narratives and that at least they were not trying to rally behind this group of parents. Where did she think these narratives were originating? I responded that we cater to parents at all costs as a district. She encouraged me and said she believed in me and that I would be a successful force of change. Why the hell was she so naive?

Staffing season was upcoming, and I dreaded conversing with Malita about tackling my staffing allocations, knowing cuts were coming. As the new leader of this school, I wanted to engage Malita from the beginning. We had already reviewed norms and initial numbers as a staff, expecting to retain this information internally until final decisions were made. However, the turnaround time was extremely tight this year. I kept the staff informed of the overall picture throughout the process. I welcomed all ideas, yet the final staffing design responsibility rested with me as the administrator. Their voice was essential to me to create a staffing plan that was as equitable as possible. Only two viable options emerged. Malita was clear about the one she would endorse. Internal transparency was going to be tricky this time. The exact day that the staffing conversation began, one grade level broke confidentiality and began engaging with parents openly. It was going to be challenging to meet individually with the members of this team to privately let them know that the final staffing design could impact their grade level only. I was advised not to do so by Malita. Her take was that the inevitable staffing reduction might affect one team, but the impact was still at a building level, not an individual one. She felt the staff needed to experience these types of confidential expectations from a leader, and it would just take more time for them to trust the staffing design process.

This staff and this community did not want to trust a process. The community was steeped in traditions they fiercely wanted to protect and sustain. In the past, the school held a dance for daughters and their dads. I again struggled with the gender labeling of this event

because it felt exclusive to various family dynamics in the school community. Just as I had with the game night, I had a handful of moms reach out to see if they could attend. The moms who attended game night now knew to show up. All were welcome here.

I arrived early to be in the building while PTCO set up. Chad never did this. He would hand over his building key to a parent! They would then come in five and six hours early to set up. I had never experienced this. I never heard of handing over my building key! They were shocked that a staff member needed to be present in the building for setting up events, with the best practice being an administrator there. Because I was at a recruitment fair, one of the teachers was willing to meet the PTCO moms early until I could get there and hang out in my office while they were in decoration mode. I offered to help decorate, but they didn't seem to have an organized vision, and I did not want to overstep.

At one point, these PTCO moms noticed an unfamiliar person at the door. They wondered if she was lost, a solicitor, and asked me to run interference. I told the group I thought she was a parent who had come early to help decorate. They all paused and looked at each other. These PTCO moms actively ignored a Black mom who showed up to help set up for the school dance. I went to the door and vibrantly welcomed her, as I would for any parent. I joined her and walked with her over to the group of women in the front lobby. They self-consciously said that they did not have anything for her to do. I suggested that this mom and I could continue hanging decorations in the hallway for them. This Black mom did not budge and stood her ground in front of these White women and made it clear it was her intent to participate as a parent volunteer. The other moms gave us some supplies and spread back into the gym and cafeteria, leaving us in the lobby alone. She confided to me that this had been the tone of this group of women for a while. She had always tried to find ways to volunteer and contribute, but these

women consistently blew her off. No one had responded to her offers multiple times when she reached out to volunteer. I was having several quiet but ongoing conversations like this with multiple Black moms in the community. This mom said that when she saw my car outside, she knew I would ensure she felt welcomed and took a risk to knock on the door. This whole exchange left me feeling humbled by her trust in me but fuming in anger at the callous way these women, who should be an inclusive body, were so brazenly elitist in how they conducted themselves with members of their community that they saw as less than fully human. This was infuriating. I also knew my actions would make this group of moms feel exposed as bigoted, and I was positive they were quietly gossiping and fuming down the hallway. I was committed to creating space as a leader for any parent who wanted to positively contribute to our school community.

While this group of White women did not want to welcome a Black mother to decorate for a school dance, it became evident who should be welcome in our school building. Our new superintendent, Sam, who replaced Jim, decided it would be a good idea to start inviting specific visitors into our schools at his direction—police officers. In early March of 2018, out of the blue, we received a district communication that district leaders had met with law enforcement agencies who supported our district. One of the things discussed was the opportunity for uniformed officers in the neighborhood to have lunch with our kids. Sam believed this to be a chance to build and grow relationships with our students and schools. Nutrition Services had already been notified to provide them with lunch if they showed up to visit.

Meanwhile, Jocelyn and I had spent time building trust with one of our moms for months, promising her that her son would never have to encounter the police while at school unless it was a dire situation. We just had no need. I opened Sam's email and had a little bit of an emotional

reaction. Having uniformed officers roll up in the lunchroom, all I could think about was how triggering this would be to several of our students, specifically one. I immediately replied to Sam, stating that, respectfully speaking, I wanted him to consider how extremely triggering this would be for a few students in my building, specifically one Black male student who had experienced more than one traumatic experience with police officers. I humbly offered that before moving forward with this in all schools, more conversation be had or more literature consumed, such as Michelle Alexander's (2010) *The New Jim Crow*, to frame better why this decision could have a variety of responses from students of color and their families, including my own.

Later that evening, a series of texts were exchanged between Malita and me. She expressed that she agreed with me. She said she was always cautious about officers coming in uniform to her school. It set some of her kids off. She said we must be mindful of these situations, even with our undocumented families. She felt that children think they could be taken away from their families when they see someone in uniform. I responded that these are some of the reasons why our equity work is a sham. She responded by saying, unfortunately, sometimes our colleagues of color can do more harm than White colleagues. I agreed noting these behaviors were rooted in tokenism and sub-oppression because our district is rooted in white supremacy. Nevertheless, we are told not to rock the boat. Rooted in her naivete, she tried to distract me by complimenting me saying that she was sure other "justice trailblazers" were told the same thing and that she appreciated my leadership. She did not respond when I texted her, "Yes, but I have even been told that by you."

When I felt shut down at work, it would feel quite lonely. I would lean into my family.

My husband, son, and I went to see *Us*, a follow-up to Jordan Peele's previous movie, *Get Out*. The premise of *Get Out* was to show the horrors of benevolent covert racism and how it can be just as dangerous and evil as blatant acts of racism. The audience is asked to consider that all that separates society's marginalized communities from White people is privilege and chance. We all have a responsibility to recognize our country's past and the groups we tried to erase because no matter how much we try to deny the ugly truth, traces of the damage continue to seep through.

I never felt I had any White work colleagues or friends with whom I could talk about some of these experiences with my family. I had plenty of diverse family and friends outside of work. With them, I could chat about the movies and documentaries we saw, the podcasts we listened to, the books I read, and the experiences I knew my husband and son lived. However, at work, I always felt I had to silence or shrink myself. I could only imagine how isolating it felt for my colleagues of color every single day. Maybe it's like living on an island, I guess. I just knew I wanted to continue learning about myself and constantly push my thinking through mentorship.

I was turning more inward in my growth. Less vocal. I knew significant changes were ultimately never going to happen in this district. I remember a mentor once sharing with me that trying to dismantle systems of oppression and focus on democracy for every human felt equal to trying to move an elephant. I can measure the movement of the elephant, or I can measure my growth while trying to move the elephant. This certainly gave me perspective. However, how do I let go of the larger picture and focus more thoughtfully on what was right in front of me? Do I give up on this part of my core leadership value, or do I press on but more quietly? As a leader, can I shift the narrative of needing safe spaces to brave spaces to dialogue about race in the workplace? A mentor always reminded me that safe spaces prioritize comfort while brave spaces

prioritize courage. The district wasn't going to change anytime soon. Nevertheless, I was changing and did not know what to do with myself. I would share with colleagues new to the leadership position that you will always make a good decision if you stand in your integrity and stay true to your core values. I forgot to admit to them, and maybe myself, that this could get lonely.

However, within my personal loneliness, as a school leader, I had a group of about seven White female parents who needed consistent communication. I knew I needed to be as personable as possible. Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine families who had felt marginalized by Chad shared that they felt at ease with me, allowing me to readily built rapport with multiple families. However, this community was less diverse than I had been used to for the last seven years. I wanted to make sure I was available and approachable. I put an invite in the latest newsletter to welcome parents to join me off campus at a nearby coffee shop on a Saturday morning, more specifically to discuss the history of parent equity meetings in this community. I wanted to hear parent perspectives so I better understood how to proceed, knowing I had much internal work to do with our staff and equity team. Sometimes, physically coming into a school for meetings can be off-putting for parents, so I wanted to try the coffee shop route. However, parent turnouts were often slim when discussing race, equity, or culturally responsive efforts. Malita had said a few times now that she trusted me and that I would win parents over one ninety-minute conversation at a time. So, I also invited her to stop by. I had done this with my previous supervisor, Stephanie. As appropriate and as her availability allowed, she always made herself available for those handfuls of super contentious situations every administrator faces at some point. I knew I had some uphill battles to climb, and I had warned my current supervisor that I feared there would be a day she would abandon me to protect the district's reputation. I had

nothing to hide, and the more she could lend an ear to this community, the more she could offer a perspective I was missing. I was new in this role in this community, and she was new. The more proactive I could be, the better.

I had been sitting in the coffee shop for about fifteen minutes when one of the Brookside parents walked in. She and I had crossed paths occasionally, and she always seemed open and supportive. We sat together near the fireplace. I offered to purchase her a beverage. We exchanged pleasantries and shared a bit about ourselves and our families. I told her I was an open book as much as possible and welcomed her feedback and questions. She did have questions. She was kind in bringing forward some of the concerns I was aware of about where I stood with class parties, discipline procedures with challenging student behaviors, the staffing plan for the following year, traffic congestion in the parking lot, and my core values around our equity work. I answered her questions openly, and she understood my perspective. She saw how some of the messaging had gotten twisted by a few critical White parents in the community who were less than inclusive and had always had their agenda because they had felt empowered by Chad. She specifically supported efforts around equity work and the need to make leadership decisions rooted in the lens of equity. She shared how comfortable she was with discussing issues around race and felt knowledgeable about how systemic racism impacts our education system.

We had quickly settled into a conversation by the time Malita showed up about forty-five minutes later. I introduced the two to each other and offered to purchase my supervisor a beverage, giving the two women time to make an acquaintance. I rejoined them and remained a little pulled back in the conversation to allow the two of them to continue their exchange. Soon enough, Malita asked how our conversation had been going, and I gave the floor to the parent to share the nature of our conversation, which then evolved into the parent asking my supervisor

some questions. I had no intention of this meeting to merge this way. However, in essence, the parent was asking Malita how she had supported me in this situation, with that decision, with this or that community challenge. Malita asked the question we all ask of parents, “What do you want to see?” The parent responded, “I think Chris has needed more support from you. Is that possible going forward? From my perspective, this is a challenging community of stubborn White parents stuck in their white traditions. Is there anything we can do to support her as parents?”

Malita was quite taken aback, and frankly, so was I! I had not seen this coming. Malita was physically reacting to the situation, and her tone changed. “She’s pissed,” I thought to myself. Quickly, as she gathered her peach leather purse and black tea, Malita sarcastically announced that it was evident that I needed further support. She felt shamed enough by the parent’s questions that she sensed the need to apologize to me in front of the parent. She turned to the parent, committed to supporting me, the school, and the community, and suddenly announced that she had another commitment. She thanked us both for our time, told me she would be in touch, said her goodbyes, and swiftly exited.

The parent and I both turned to each other with a look that said, “What just happened?” I kept a brave and smiling face, but my stomach was churning. The parent offered that she had not expected that sort of reaction and was trying to grasp the situation and asked me if I thought I would be okay. I told the parent I had always been supported and hoped for nothing less. She said she wanted to be a part of positive change and pledged her support, saying it was nice to get to know me better during our visit. I thanked her for her time, insight, and bravery to ask questions. As we parted ways, she lightly said, “See ya Monday morning!” Oh, did she ever.

My commute home from the coffee shop was about seven minutes, yet I was unsettled the entire drive. I usually listen to music when I drive, but I turned off the stereo. I pulled into the

garage and sat in my car for a few minutes, trying to make sense of my emotions. I reached out to a trusted colleague to process the situation. Should I let it rest over the remainder of the weekend? Should I reach out to Malita? She had said she had another commitment, and I didn't want to disturb her. However, I was concerned with her reaction at this parent meeting. This trusted colleague knew the personalities involved, and we both landed on taking the step I had taken once before during this school year. I reached out to Stephanie, the assistant superintendent. I sent a brief text saying I had concerns about the coffee shop meeting. Stephanie quickly called me, and I gave her a quick summary. She asked me if I could go for a walk the next day. We set up a time to do so.

Stephanie and I met early Sunday morning for a walk. She asked me to start from the beginning. Although she was known to gossip, exaggerate, or spin a conversation to her advantage, one thing about her is that she has a good memory, so when you needed to jump back into a conversation with her, she could recall facts and step right back into the scenario with you. The support that had been lacking with Malita was the slow turnaround time to respond to parents or get back to me about advice. Back in the day, we had more autonomy to address community concerns. In recent years, we were given a directive to include our supervisors at the first sign of community conflict. Malita said she always had to check in with her peers before making a final decision for me, but parents were festering. On multiple occasions, she told me one thing and a parent another and then tried to soften the discrepancy with an apology, saying she forgot a specific detail or was unaware. Depending on her audience, it felt like she talked from both sides of her mouth.

Stephanie asked questions, and I recapped all the essential highlights, including the handful of concerned parent emails she had received. She asked me what I thought I needed. I

mean, I didn't know at this point. I felt the parent concerns were piling up on Malita's desk, and issues that could have been resolved with an efficient and solid response to parents or me were growing more extensive than necessary. Malita's reaction the day before made me believe she was fretting and took the conversation personally. I had kept her updated all year long. However, she acted like some of these were new concerns. I had emails and text messages as evidence. At this point, the concern was visibility. Chad had a robust presence on campus, but I was drowning trying to clean up the millions of loose ends he left behind like shards of broken glass. I was a White female leader cleaning up behind a mediocre White male leader, just like my supervisor stated at the beginning of the year.

Stephanie admitted that the transition had been clunky for me. I reminded her that Stewart, the former interim principal had stated that he and I needed to sit down early on in my transition so I had a clear sense of what I would be facing. However, that conversation never happened. She admitted I had been thrown in somewhat uninformed. Nevertheless, she blew off my comment when I repeated that Stewart had told me that when he saw the condition in which Chad left this school, it had brought him to his knees. I let Stephanie know that Stewart told me he had gone straight to Jim to tell him how upset he was, that he could not believe things were allowed to get this out of hand in a building, and that he would never cover for a building principal again.

I don't know what I expected as an outcome of this conversation. Maybe documentation? Acknowledgment and accountability? A chance to tell my side before things went to shit? It was decided that some temporary support was needed to allow my presence to be better seen in the community. Before I took over this school, it took both Stewart and Caroline to support this school for the six months leading up to my arrival. Stephanie said she would see if Caroline

could return and support me behind the scenes so I could be as visible as possible. Stephanie asked if I needed her to come out and speak on my behalf to offer transparent communication to the staff because my supervisor was not ready to handle this. Great. That feels reassuring. I didn't think it was a great idea. Malita was already seething, and I knew she would be further angry once Stephanie approached her about this conversation. I felt my premonition about Malita abandoning me to protect the district's brand was forthcoming. However, I did not expect what I encountered on Monday morning.

I arrived at school ahead of most staff on Monday morning, which was my typical schedule. Our district administration meeting had been canceled, and Malita reached out via text to see if I could meet with her. She wanted to discuss a follow-up plan connected to my conversation with Stephanie. I saw a car in the parking lot near my parking space. It was Malita. Based on the tone of her text, I assumed she was waiting for me to park, and we would walk into the building together. Yeah, that is not how it went. I heard her car door slam as I turned the key off in my ignition. She walked right past my car without looking back, slung her peach leather purse on her shoulder, flipped her hair back and swiftly walked into the building with a determined step in her high heels, and made an immediate left turn to go into the restroom. She was livid. She was slick to be neutral in her text messages only to show up this infuriated. Sighing to myself, I gathered my things and locked my car, walked into the building, unlocked my office, put down my things, and waited. I sat in a chair where we could sit side by side instead of behind my desk. She eventually walked in and sat down.

I do not even know how to describe the level of condescension in her voice. I was about to be schooled. I just sat and listened. She launched into her purpose for visiting, letting me know that Stephanie had brought her up to speed on the situation at the school. Her tone felt

exceptionally condescending. She was seething with anger and embarrassment. She had a list of seven items to be addressed:

1. The retired principal would return to support me several hours a day, several days a week, to free me up.
2. I needed to be visible at arrival and dismissal daily.
3. I would be provided coverage so I could attend PTCO Board meetings, and I would provide them a space to meet.
4. My supervisor would engage in a listening tour by coming to the school to hear the perspectives of any staff member who wanted to speak with her. I would provide a private space for these meetings, either for a team or individuals and provide sub-coverage so the union representative could attend every meeting.
5. My supervisor would conduct a mediation meeting between the PTCO moms and me.
6. My supervisor would advocate for a .5 in staffing to diminish the steadfast concerns and complaints of the grade level facing a reduction.
7. I would focus on building positive relationships and morale.

As Malita reviewed this list, she looked at her watch and asked, “Are you not supposed to be outside for student arrival right now?”

I nodded.

“Well, then, let’s get out there right now because, as you know, your visibility is a major concern,” she taunted.

I didn’t even respond. I reached for my cell phone and radio and kept pace with Malita as we headed out the front door. Once out the front door, the timing was such that the supportive parent from the weekend coffee shop meeting approached us to say hello. With a fake smile that

looked like she would rather chew glass, Malita greeted the mom. Malita knew we were still awaiting a visit from a school resource officer for parking lot feedback. We were actively working on a new traffic pattern with the crossing guards since we only had a right-turn exit. She surveyed the scene and began peppering me with questions. “Why is it taking so long for cars to exit the parking lot? Why is this red car still sitting here? Where are your crossing guards positioned? Come on, Chris! Let’s get some traffic moving along here!”

She turned and made a grand gesture of tossing her peach leather purse toward the landscaping fence so she could get down to business moving this traffic along. No disrespect, but she looked ridiculous. The parent was again watching her with a questioning look, asking me, “What the hell is she doing?”

In front of this parent, Malita suddenly turned to me and asked, “Why is this daycare van trying to pull over here instead of up there? Why do you not know this, Chris?”

I turned to her and responded, “You are doing this to intentionally humiliate me.”

I quietly turned and walked back into the building. Shortly, Malita appeared back in my office. It was tense. She tried to play dumb about her behavior in front of the school. I remained calm and said something I didn’t think she expected and I certainly had not planned on saying. I turned to her and said, “This feels like you are retaliating against me for conversing with the assistant superintendent, and it’s not okay. If this is how you will offer support, I am happy to write you a letter of resignation right here and now. I do not have to be here. I do not need to tolerate the way you just treated me.”

“No! No! That is not necessary at all.” she attempted to backpedal. I think she realized she had messed up. She tried to soften things, but the damage was done.

I added, “The things you have on this list are about transformational leadership and adaptive change, which takes time. Yet, out front just now, you dehumanized me over the driving patterns of a daycare van. That is technical leadership. You either want a transformational leader or a building manager. I can do one or the other, but I cannot do both.” The conversation came to a standstill. It was as if she didn’t know how to respond, so I referenced the list she came to discuss with me to be clear on my responsibilities. She confirmed that she would go back and talk further with Stephanie and get back to my office manager to set up time slots for her listening tour with staff the following week. What more was there to say? I had a busy day ahead of me. I felt so sick to my stomach, angry, and self-aware that I had predicted this behavior months ago when I told Malita she would eventually abandon me as a school leader and protect the brand of the district. What was unsettling to me was trying to anticipate how this would play out in the coming days.

Already, I was not too fond of the month of April. Following the rape I survived in 1991, I had to complete a composite sketch of the suspect on April 4, 1991. Malita’s act of retaliatory humiliation took place on April 9, 2019. The time stamp on this only reminded me that I had already endured and survived something far worse than she could ever lay on me. I contacted a former colleague who had left the district on his terms to process what happened that morning. He invited me for dinner to talk through the incident. Once I slid into the booth and locked eyes with my friend, it took everything to hold back my angry tears. We sat in silence for a minute so I could take a breath and gather my thoughts. He reached for my hand, but I declined and said I was okay. The waitress stopped by to take our order. No sooner had I begun to delve into the day’s events than my phone rang. It was Malita. I wanted to ignore the call but knew how it would look if I did not answer. Plus, I wanted my friend to witness to the conversation.

Immediately, Malita began apologizing to me about how the morning went. I held the phone away from my ear in complete shock. I did not put the phone on speaker or anything, but my friend was catching the essence of the conversation. Malita said that over the day, she had been reflecting and realized the way she had treated me disrespectfully and that she realized that she had not been there for me and wanted me to accept her apology and her sudden new focus on offering me support. Her voice was disgustingly cheerful. I didn't buy it. I believe she went back and told Stephanie what happened between us, probably boasting. However, she must have been quickly coached about my use of the term retaliation and my willingness to resign on the spot. Regarding our relationship, I couldn't come back from this with her no matter what happened next.

Malita asked my thoughts on what she had just offered me regarding support, staffing, and the return of the retired principal as a resource. I wanted to express again what I stated that morning firmly, so I repeated myself. I was clear that it was my position that her intent that morning was to dehumanize me completely. I did not need to tolerate being treated with such disrespect, repeating that I was happy to resign at any moment. As I was restating this to my supervisor, my friend grabbed my hand from across the table and held it as I got my words out. Her response was to try and frame this as all a big misunderstanding. I knew what was happening. Those to whom she reported had instructed her to make our relationship workable for now until they could strategize the next steps. I did not trust her or the situation in which I found myself.

My friend and I continued dinner, and he helped me process how to consider proceeding with this situation in a way that kept me rooted in professionalism while also feeling unapologetic about maintaining my dignity in the process. Who knows what was about to happen

next, but he and many others remained steadfast by my side to this day. After I received the frantically apologetic phone call from Malita, I received a much more sterile email from her the following day, as if the phone call never took place. She went right back to protecting herself and the brand, right back to the lie. She tried to summarize the narrative designed to manage me and protect herself and the district. She shared that many parents emailed the School Board over this school year. The overall message from my parents was that I was not visible. I was condescending and abrasive toward staff and parents. According to the parents, the school's climate was negative and unwelcoming. Parents were concerned that teachers were unhappy. PTCO Board members shared that they were unwilling to meet with me. Some parents even chose not to give her their name for fear of retaliation from me toward teachers and students. She repeated the seven steps she had scrawled on a piece of paper when we met in my office the day before.

Building positive relationships with staff and the community by being visible and accessible during drop off and pick up was paramount. Attend the PTCO Board meetings. Build collaborative relationships with my staff, parents, and volunteers. To support me in the efforts listed above, she agreed to support me with the following resources:

1. Increase my staffing by a .5 FTE.
2. They contracted a retired principal to support me full-time from April 16 through May 24. This support will allow me to delegate daily tasks to make every effort to establish trusting, collaborative partnerships with my staff, parents, and community.
3. They offered financial support to cover the cost of substitutes and meals so that I could meet with each team for planning and team building. This included the cost for

me to host an appreciation reception for my community volunteers and cover the cost for me to treat my PTCO Board Members.

4. She scheduled time to be at our school all day to meet with staff members and gather input on how this year has been for them and their hope for next year because my success was important, and she hoped these supports would encourage my success.

Notably, things are communicated off the record via text messages instead of a formal platform such as email. I could see the narrative Malita was trying to build, just as I had predicted on January 18, 2019—no mention of our dedication to inclusive excellence, trailblazing justice leadership, or culturally responsive practices. Neither students nor equity work was even mentioned. What I wanted to reply in response to her was, “It’s clear that our focus on equity work has never been a priority at this school, so I am educating them on something that should have been a priority if you go by everything on our district mission, vision, and letterhead. It is obvious that it is not. If it were a value, these issues would be with specific staff members and the PTCO, but it’s not.” Nevertheless, I did not.

I was too busy focusing on my school and wrapping up some observational rounds with teachers. I had two teachers out on leave this year, and one was returning, and we needed to complete the evaluation process. She was a veteran teacher with some quirks but knew about literacy instruction. She was always quietly supportive of my leadership. She didn’t feel the need or even sometimes the comfort level to be verbose, but she chose her words wisely and spoke up when it mattered regarding students.

As we were wrapping up a post-observation meeting, this ally asked me, “Who is this gal from your last school?” She showed me a Facebook picture of a previous staff member. I was taken aback. I answered that she was a grade-level teacher who had retired from my previous

school. The ally told me that the retired teacher was an extremely nasty woman who was unhappy and had horrible things to say about me. I asked her what she meant by this. I then learned that a private Facebook page was created by teachers from Sycamore Elementary who had invited Brookside teachers and parents to join. The intent was to overthrow my leadership and get me fired. Good to know. I did let Malita know what I had learned. It's not that I brushed it off, but I think I had to block it out.

Either way, I was slowly being relieved of my duties. As promised, Caroline who had shared leadership duties with Stewart to hold the school afloat until I arrived, well, she was returning. She was sweet, and I cannot think of anyone who disliked her. Likewise, she is a loving advocate of the district. In her eyes, Chad's behavior was a terrible stain on the district's reputation. In my eyes, his behavior was an example of the terrible stain that the district had become.

Before she arrived, I prepared for Caroline's arrival with flowers, some welcome cards, and light decor. The staff truly loved her and her motherly approach to leadership, so how I received her back into the building mattered. They were watching. She was a people person and a well-respected leader. However, what we were dealing with in the district shocked her. She was a lovely leader with great memories and naïve hope. I was now rooted in realism and the permanence of the situation I found myself in as a leader. Caroline and I sat down so she could be pre-briefed. I felt appreciative and helpless all at once. I felt the writing was on the wall, and Caroline was there as just a performative resource to hold steady until I finished evaluations and the district figured out what to do with me.

She asked where things stood with specific cases and situations as a place to start. Some of the things I had further uncovered made her jaw drop. I wanted to be open with her about how

I felt, but as sweet as she was, I figured anything I shared with her went back to Malita. We both knew that. She was kind in taking a secondary role and felt comfortable working on master schedules and other technical components of the job. At the same time, I focused on the human side of the position. I felt like I was going through the motions. I felt numb. I felt angry. I felt defeated. However, I wanted to be there for the staff members who believed in me, and I wanted to be highly present for my kids. Somehow, in all of this, no one had mentioned the children.

I remember the first afternoon Caroline and I stood outside together at dismissal. Two of the PTCO moms made sure to let me know my presence at dismissal met with their approval. I knew the intention was for the presence of Caroline to help bolster my visibility, but with her other life commitments, she really was only able to come by a few days a week during the middle of the day, but I certainly appreciated the technical items she so humbly tackled during this time. I just felt this was ultimately futile.

Late one afternoon, the Brookside Elementary building engineer popped his head into my office before he left. He noticed Caroline had returned. He asked what was happening, asking, “Are you unable to do your job? I think you do your job just fine from what I can tell. Are you okay?” I wanted to give him honest answers, but I knew better. I just thanked him for reaching out, and as he well knew, “Sometimes it just is what it is.”

“I know *that’s* right,” he responded. I think we both said a lot without saying much at all.

Plans had been made for teachers or teams of teachers to meet with Malita for her listening tour in late April 2019. I wanted to be clear about the confidentiality in the process for the teachers. The office manager received an email from Malita with directions on building a listening schedule. She was nervous about it being perfect for Malita and asked me to look it over, but I respectfully declined. In no way did I ever want to be accused of glancing over the

document even to know who intended to speak to Malita and who did not. I stated this in front of Caroline, who had been commissioned to support me. I wanted to be as hands-off as possible and let the process run. One of the special service providers offered her office space for these meetings, so I intended to steer clear of that area of the building.

I had no idea this location had later been changed to a different room. No one told me.

At this late stage of the school year, one teacher was highly delayed in getting her spring observation scheduled. I was surprised that this observation had been rescheduled for this morning. The teacher was oblivious to anything going on with Malita's listening tour, yet I had a job to do and a building to run. At my appointed time, I arrived at this teacher's tiny learning space to observe her deliver small group instruction to students needing specialized instruction. I made myself a space to sit out of the way while I awaited her return to the space with her students. At about that moment, I thought I heard voices next door. Almost simultaneously, the door to this tight learning space swung forcefully open, and the union representative and I found ourselves looking at each other at the exact moment the special service provider returned with her small group. All three of us were exchanging glances with each other while the students took their seats.

The teacher should have paid attention first to schedule her observation. Secondly, the teacher had not noticed the multiple communications regarding Malita's visit that morning. All I knew in that split second was that it indeed appeared that I was intent on eavesdropping. Malita was hosting her meetings right next door, on the other side of the wall. Before I could say anything, the union representative asked the teacher if she knew what was happening next door. It was evident neither of us did. I offered to reschedule, but the teacher wanted to proceed and reiterated this to her union representative. Awkward. I felt compelled to tell Caroline what

happened when I returned to the front office. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Caroline confronted the office manager, who felt embarrassed that she had not put two and two together and had not given me a heads-up about the room location. What could honestly be done now, anyway?

A few days later, Malita returned to finish her listening tour for a few staff members absent the Friday before. Several staff members asked to speak to me about their experience when speaking with Malita. They first wanted to tell me exactly what they had stated to her because they feared their words would not be fully communicated. I was worried about them coming to talk with me because I feared that later, someone might suggest I coerced them in some way. Nevertheless, they insisted because they felt so strongly about how Malita had made them feel during their conversations. I felt horrible that anyone was even being put in this position. They cited the following concerns:

1. The union representative was positioned in the room by default. If a staff member wanted to speak to Malita privately, they had to ask the representative to leave, which felt awkward. Some did and some did not.
2. They felt Malita asked leading questions about their experience with my leadership and had to clarify what they only wanted to be written down.
3. They felt Malita did not do much typing as they spoke, so a few demanded that she show them exactly what she had typed. On more than one occasion, she had typed only a portion of what they said to her.
4. They felt Malita's mind was made up about my leadership before their conversation began. Their takeaway was that I was being set up and could not get past this.

I was meeting with Malita and Stephanie at 4:30 p.m. the following afternoon. The two had to be connected. In my mind, they had already decided to remove me as principal. Out of the blue, Malita called me to inform me of my right to bring representation to this meeting the next day. I had one day's notice to secure representation. What that meant, I didn't know. I was trying to put one foot in front of the other.

Feeling crushed and nervous, I immediately reached out to the two colleagues who served in the role of representation for administrators. The first person listened to the summary of events, but her schedule was tight. She advised me to contact our second colleague to see her availability. The second colleague also listened to the short version of my purpose for calling and said she would arrange to join me the next day. I had also been advised that if a representative from human resources were not present, things would be fine. A conversation only. No big deal.

I arrived at the requested building location and waited for my representative to join me in the lobby. Soon, she and I were escorted to a conference room by Malita. Imagine the visceral reaction I had when I saw Monica, the director from Human Resources seated at the table. Great. Fabulous. Say nothing, I thought. Just listen.

Malita began the conversation by welcoming all of us and moved right into the purpose of the meeting. She recapped that she had met with the staff and generated a general list of the feedback she gathered. She told the staff that she and I wanted feedback on their hopes and dreams for the school. She said she had to promise the staff to keep feedback to general bullet points so their feedback could not be identifiable. She confirmed that she spoke to forty out of ninety-six employees on the first day and three more on the second visit. The building union representative sat through most of the meetings. She met with the PTCO Board separately but did not include their feedback in this documentation.

Malita went on to say that she was surprised with the amount of information people were willing to share about the negative culture and climate of the school—much mistrust. Many of the teachers expressed that they were walking on eggshells. They were dealing with anxiety and depression. They were questioning themselves, and it was impacting their ability to teach or their confidence and ability to teach kids. They shared that my interactions with them were belittling, demeaning, short, abrasive, and causing them to feel hurt. There were many emotions: much crying, much shaking, much fear. Malita then asked me if I would also say that the school culture was a current concern. I responded by saying all the concerns she was sharing about me were the same concerns I had received from the staff regarding the principal before me.

Malita responded that the Brookside Elementary staff felt like the negative culture and climate had worsened this year, and they connected that back to my leadership. She asked me if I had any questions. I told her the feedback she offered was so general that I had no questions. She went on. She said the teachers expressed a need for more communication, suggesting I would tell the PTCO one thing and then tell the teachers something different. She cited the ongoing dialogue about Valentine's parties as an example. At this point, Malita admitted that she and I had discussed the Valentine's party issue at length, that the teachers wanted to downplay the holiday, and that it just got out of hand. She admitted I was trying to support teachers and that I was trying to help them reel it back and simplify the class celebrations. She also stated that when parents called her about Valentine's party, they were told that the teachers were told that Valentine's Day parties had been referred to as a white holiday and that the district was moving away from having Valentine's Day parties. So that was how parents interpreted it. Malita even laughed as she finished that sentence because she knew this was false, but she now submitted this as evidence in her findings. She had to keep up the lie.

I remained silent as Malita continued to share her evidence. She knew well that the staff on two grade-level teams were telling the community members one thing and not owning the triangulation in which they were engaging. They did not want big Valentine's parties, so they misconstrued a culturally responsive conversation we had and told the parents, in essence, that the district was moving away from these holidays. The parents never wanted the teachers in the same meetings with me about community concerns. These specific parents would hear my clarifications and seem fine when they left my office but continued to be gaslit by staff members. The bond between the staff and the parents was more robust than with me, and they remained united.

Wait, there was more. Malita suggested that I had told a specific staff member that I was really unhappy about the behavior I was seeing. Then they felt they had to tell their team, who would walk on eggshells thinking they would get in trouble for similar behaviors. Again, I remained silent as this was a flat-out fabrication. Malita finally wrapped up by expressing that there was a great deal of mistrust among general education classroom teachers. There was a great deal of mistrust among the special service provider team. At the end, she tossed in a small acknowledgment that I had been trying to work on that. I continued to listen and not speak. What was the point?

Stephanie picked up the conversation from here to add her perspective. She acknowledged that taking over this school had been a tough place to be in as a school leader "and those kinds of things." I had noticed that was her catchphrase when she was struggling with the truth. I had seen it with parents and other colleagues over the years. She continued to say that the shift in community and staff support to be in this collective negative space happened so fast, just so very fast. Stephanie acknowledged that she and I had talked before, that I felt like most of the

staff was coming along, and that I felt I had a good relationship with most of them. She also admitted what Malita left out within the feedback. Some people shared that this school was a tough place “and those kinds of things” but they were in the minority. She knew when I was transitioning into the role that I had already known that I needed to go in and build relationships. Stephanie continued. However, for whatever reason, based on this feedback, those relationships did not come to fruition. Now, the problem was amplified. Parents were calling the school board. They tried giving me staffing. They put Caroline in place to support to me. Ultimately, this ends up on the shoulders of the school leader. Me. She rhetorically asked if I thought the situation was recoverable. She suggested that this would take some time and some reflection on my part. Stephanie just knew that the theme of the staff feeling harassed could lead to grievances “and those kinds of things.” This did not put the school community or me in a great place. Malita interjected that her takeaway was that she had such an overwhelming sense of desperation and lack of hope from the staff. She was concerned because teachers feel threatened and frightened at work if they do not feel valued or affirmed. She could not imagine it was not impacting their ability to teach kids.

Finally, Monica expressed her purpose in attending this meeting. She said that in speaking with Malita, the staff had used terms like hostile environment and harassment, not that any of those claims had come to HR, but if they did, it would be of concern because anytime they have those terms said outwardly, that is something that they must investigate. So, the reason she was at the meeting was because those terms were used. At this point, my representative asked, “So, are you saying that you are going to investigate?” Monica responded that those terms were used in conversation with Malita, but they had not determined that a hostile environment or claims of harassment were true from an HR standpoint.

Stephanie continued from there to discuss the next steps. She apologized for jamming the meeting in so quickly, but it had to be done because of their schedules, and they didn't feel like it could wait. She felt I needed time to think but clarified again that I was not being put on leave. I should take a day or two to wrap my head around what I needed and what possibilities there might be. She said she knew when I was stressed that I lost weight and that I should take care of myself. Way to body shame me. She said she wanted me to take at least a couple of days, and then they would figure out what they were going to do.

I clarified that I had several class celebrations I needed attend to engage with students with small rewards throughout the day. My being gone would only be another example of me not being visible, which, at this point, was a directive. Stephanie said, "I would not do that if I were you." I was strong enough to separate this conversation from my leadership responsibilities. I needed to be there for my kids. Stephanie said she would let me make that determination but tried to toss in there that she had just received yet another email from a parent when, in fact, it was an email we already had discussed.

From an HR standpoint, Monica wanted to further advise me not to share anything outside of that room and to refrain from doing anything that could be considered retaliation. Do not ask anyone any questions because they could come back and claim retaliation, and then we would have to deal with policies around retaliation for participating in conversations. I confirmed that I never had engaged in such behavior, nor would I ever. My representative wanted to confirm if any timeline had been promised to staff. I wanted to ask only one question: Would I have an opportunity to respond to these allegations, and if so, by when? They didn't have an answer. They told me they would get back to me next week.

As I drove home expressionless and numb, I turned off the stereo and reflected. I was not the same person I was when I started in this district. I reflected on the mentorship I received from colleagues, including the advice always to remember how tokens prove their worth to the oppressor by selling out those who are part of their group. It's not a bug. It's a feature of white supremacy. What was happening to me was in alignment with the actual values of the district, which is to keep certain people happy. If you do not, they will form a mob. Leadership truly rooted in equity was contradictory to the values of the district. If someone were truly interested in standing alongside me with this feedback they had gathered, they would review it and collaborate with me to find some middle ground. As I had shared with Malita, we value keeping teachers happy regardless of the harm they may be causing. We value keeping parents happy regardless of their views rooted in white supremacy. Anyone who tries to change the culture has no chance. One teacher said she would rather have the school culture Chad provided than the one I was trying to cultivate. She would instead put up with sexual harassment from a male leader suggesting what thong she should wear. Clearly, Malita did not want the actual conflict in core values addressed. She wanted the problem addressed. I was viewed as the problem. I thought about what I had wanted to say to Malita, Stephanie, and Monica:

“You put me in a school replacing an unethical man, and you're asking me to be like him for the sake of getting along. You all made the situation disappear instead of fully disciplining him for his actions. Despite his bad behavior, he had supporters. So, when you all entertain their mobbing tactics, all it does is legitimize his behavior and diminish my ethics. I do not belong here in this district. Here are my keys.”

But I didn't. I went to work on Friday and completed my duties to dress up in a dinosaur costume, hand out treats, and conduct small morning and afternoon assemblies to celebrate

student accomplishments. Because I could not easily see out of my costume, two parents escorted me from classroom to classroom to deliver treats. Their students were classmates of the student who had reported being made fun of for being Mexican. While escorting me in my costume, these two parents took great joy in seeing if I would take the bait when they openly engaged in telling offensive jokes involving tacos (“What did the Mexican say when he was upset? I do not want to taco ’bout it.) and tamales (Did you check the weather for today? It is chili today and hot tamale).

Further, we were hosting a Dessert Night for Moms later that evening. Two Black moms with whom I had built relationships approached me. They said their sole purpose in attending the dessert event was to support me in the sea of “these White people”. Throughout the event, I carried myself with integrity and professionalism, knowing I had done my best for my kids. As it turns out, this would be my last formal day as a principal. What was supposed to be a sweet memory of a quiet evening with desserts, soft music, and tea to celebrate our moms was not to be. My last visual of this school community was watching students and moms dancing in a long conga line in the gym while blasting Def Leppard’s “Pour Some Sugar on Me” as loud as the speakers would allow.

I went home knowing my career as a principal was over. I spent the entire weekend creating a binder of evidence in response to the accusations presented to me. I chose not to get in the weeds of the subjective comments that were outright lies or gross misinterpretations. Instead, if I had data or a perspective to share, I highlighted it in my documentation. Many comments surprised me as they did not resonate with my recollections of conversations with staff. Comments around my conversational tone leading to feelings of anxiety, walking on eggshells, depression, and despair were distinctly reminiscent of feedback I continued to receive all year

regarding Chad. It was the same vinyl record this staff put on repeat to deflect from their inadequacies. Nevertheless, I took the time to reflect on the feedback and the concerns offered. All I could do was provide some context and perspective on how things had progressed from my viewpoint. My goal was to determine what was best for the students in the school community and to respond accordingly by retracing my steps.

By retracing my steps, I reflected on the fact that my appointment to this school was in response to the departure of Chad due to his unethical behavior. Throughout my career, including this year, I have always been open to feedback, guidance, and consultation from the school community, parents, staff, district directors, and department leaders. District leadership deemed my leadership experience, skills, and style an excellent fit to stabilize and carry the school community forward.

To prepare me for the transition, Sam had promised that he and I would sit down at some point and have a long conversation. Unfortunately, this never came to fruition due to his transition into the superintendency following Jim. Stewart also said we would sit down for lunch, but his travel plans did not allow for a follow-up meeting. Shortly after my announcement, Stephanie let me know that conversations had begun between the staff from Sycamore Elementary to Brookside Elementary to which I was transitioning and that the conversations were primarily negative. It originated from a pocket of teachers who had been upset that I had to complete a two-year improvement plan process with one staff member eventually retiring and a second process during which a staff member had to be placed on leave and eventually resigned. Throughout both of those processes at Sycamore, I communicated with Monica and others in the Office of Human Resources, who assured me that my approach was ethical and supported by the district. At one point, the union president was brought out to address some teachers' concerns.

He and I met to review his communication with these teachers. Upon the conclusion of the meeting, Monica contacted me soon after to express that she had a voicemail from the union president where he had expressed that the meeting went well between us. He concluded that the concerned teachers did not want to listen and wanted to hold on to their traditions. Comments between the two school communities suggested I was intimidating, condescending, and retaliatory as a building principal. However, upon my departure from Sycamore Elementary, I was in good standing as a “Highly Effective” administrator, not knowing that the Facebook group conversation was intent on spreading a false narrative about my leadership to influence the Brookside Elementary community.

I knew I needed to ensure that I would support Brookside staff, build relationships, and bring in leadership experts and resources to customize support to best meet the needs and interests of the staff and community, knowing that only so much could be accomplished in the first year. The first step I took was to purchase the book, *Dignity* by Donna Hicks (2013) as a gift for the Brookside staff to help them heal and move forward from the past year.

During the transitional months of April, May, and August, I spent numerous hours with Brookside staff and community members one-on-one to listen to their concerns, fears, reservations, anger, anxiety, and hopes for the school community, including a Google Doc for feedback. I introduced myself to the staff formally during our staff development week at the beginning of the year, and we engaged in a well-known personality training to get to know each other in a new way. As our Staff Work Week ended, numerous staff members stopped by individually and in groups to say thank you, with one resonating collective comment, “Thank you for all you have done for us this week. We appreciate you. You are not who we were told you would be.” For Back-To-School Night, I received overwhelming staff feedback that the

welcome speeches had gone on too long in years past. I committed to a shortened introduction to emphasize students meeting their teachers since we held off announcing class lists until August due to the transition in leadership.

My professional goal was focused on normalizing, stabilizing, and bringing dignity to the teacher evaluation process because teachers had expressed immense anxiety about this process. They cited many examples of how their performance had not been adequately evaluated or that the only comments they had received verbally from Chad were about which color of thong they should wear under their leggings to go with their outfit. They felt a deep sense of mistrust about being spied on years back. This entire process needed to be normalized. Teachers had a choice between the 10-minute or 40-minute observation cycles and had complete autonomy to schedule every observation through the Office Manager. The sheer volume of scheduling was new for the office manager, and I began to discover double bookings, cancellations, and multiple rescheduling after the fact. I worked with the office manager and teachers to accommodate their requests. The result was that every teacher could complete an entire evaluation cycle, with comments in every quality standard area, with a final rating of either “Effective” or “Highly Effective”. I was open to feedback and assumed positive intent in my level of ratings for each teacher’s evaluation while offering steps to document growth areas.

I continued retracing my steps. Back in August, Malita came to the school to visit with me. She was supportive in our conversation. By then, I had begun to unearth several themes regarding every system and practice at the school that needed to be rebuilt and grounded in data, research, and policy. These reflections were noted in my self-assessment. Malita expressed support from the lens of a female administrator and spoke to the invisible burden of female

leadership, specifically when we follow male colleagues in leadership roles. She shared that she felt we must work twice as hard and confirmed her support for the deep work ahead of me.

I had always been open to feedback and sought it out my entire career. I was placed at this school to replace an unethical leader, and I was told that I could use my known experience, skills, moral compass, and passion to best meet the needs of students through the lens of equity. At the conclusion of retracing my steps, I knew my only goal was to work collectively to find a solution that best met the needs of the students, staff, and community. I never said I was looking for a demotion.

The following Tuesday after my Friday appearance as a dinosaur, I was summoned to Stephanie's office to respond to the allegations presented to me at our last meeting. I arrived with my representative, and Malita escorted us to a conference room on the main floor. I had my binder of evidence tucked in my work bag, as I had been advised not to present it as evidence until the end of the meeting. My representative would prompt me when to share it, as if she had not already told Malita, Stephanie and Monica that I had the binder with me. I played her game.

All five of us greeted each other and took our seats. Malita led the meeting. I noticed her cell phone placed face down on the table in front of all of us. I realized that the meeting was being recorded. Malita began with questions about the themes of concern presented in the staff feedback. She had about nine questions covering various topics, but they could have been more specific. The exercise of typing up my reflections on my self-evaluation and putting together a three-inch binder of artifacts before the meeting helped provide me with a sense of calm and composure. I could recall from my documentation what I needed to focus on when answering her questions. All of this felt performative and meaningless. We had already covered this ground, but it allowed me to answer more specifically. I was glad I had refrained from answering anything

the week before, and I answered these questions today with sincerity, facts, and evidence. The HR director was typing my responses the entire time.

I was not expecting this at all, but once we completed her series of questions, Stephanie asked me if I wanted to share anything I wanted them to consider. I hadn't thought of anything specific I wanted to say because I did not anticipate the opportunity to speak freely.

Nevertheless, something overtook me, and I began speaking. I suppose I thought about how humiliated I had felt ever since Malita slammed her car door and walked into my building without me the month before. I recalled feeling dehumanized before a sea of parents and students arriving for school that day. I recalled the fake apology she offered off the record during dinner with my former colleague. I recalled the dangerous yet unfounded language of harassment and retaliation Monica had inserted into the conversation just one week ago. I remembered I had kids who needed me to use my voice. I remember I had a husband and son who knew my strength and integrity as a person. And I remembered I had survived so much worse in my life.

I felt like words began to float out of my mouth. I started at the beginning of my career. I told them how, at the beginning of my teaching career, my principal asked me to be a part of the newly formed equity team, as back around 2005, we were beginning our district equity work. When I asked the principal why I was the first person he selected to begin this team at Crestwood Elementary, he said it was because he saw my leadership potential. However, when I held his gaze in a stare with my head tilted to the right, he admitted it was also because I was married to a Black man with a Black child. I enjoyed the work and learned a lot back then. I am still friends with Black parents whose children I taught. However, this leadership role also exposed me to the school community. One consequence of this came to light when the PTCO President's child was grade-accelerated in my class. The parent quickly discovered from other community members

who I was married to and started a petition to have me removed as a teacher at that school because I was a bad example for children because I was married to a Black man. I remember the fierce support from my principal during that experience, and I have always tried to pay that forward.

I then moved on to Heartlake Elementary, where I served as an assistant principal. In that role, I was charged with building a following of Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine and other marginalized parents to build a coalition focused on culturally responsive practices at our school. I contacted each family separately and got a response from close to fifty parents to join us in an ongoing partnership until my departure to my next promotion. At the time, my principal partner told me that my ability to connect with families was an example of good leadership. I remain friends with several parents from that parent coalition group still today.

Next, I had the opportunity to serve as the principal at Sycamore Elementary. However, before I secured the position, I had to participate in an interview process. During that interview process, I was told by my supervisor that I needed to be transparent and disclose that I was a White woman married to a Black man and that I was the mother of a Biracial child. The interview committee had a right to know what they were getting if they selected me. I noticed the HR director was no longer typing.

During my first tenure as principal, my leadership was constantly challenged because I did not share the same perspective or outlook on life with the majority of White female staff, to the point where the “F-word” was directed at me in front of students and other staff members with zero consequence. I made no excuses, but I did not pay forward the grace and support I owed to the assistant principal, Crystal, who served alongside me at the time in that toxic environment. I had since apologized for my actions, and part of my apology to her meant I

promised to commit to never repeating the same behavior. I reminded Malita that she and I had a conversation in January about my intention to provide Jocelyn with that grace and support I knew she needed under highly similar circumstances at Brookside Elementary. At this point, Malita's eyes were red and watery. I kept going and stated that as a White female administrator, I constantly sat in white-framed spaces in the workplace. I heard what my White leadership colleagues said when they thought no one from any marginalized group was listening. I heard what we say we believe as a district. Nevertheless, I went home to a Black husband and our Black son. I witnessed the damaging actions, decisions, and traumatizing environments he and students who looked like him endured even after two decades of equity work in the district.

I took a risk and further shared with them that I had been recently asked, as a part of a study being conducted by a district peer, which of the six pillars of equity from a district framework I would want the most support in as an administrator so that I could further grow as a leader to help actualize the district's commitment to inclusive excellence. I was hyper-aware to keep my tone calm and respectful when I told these women and my representative that my response to the question was that I did not want help for any of the six pillars. Not because I did not need to grow, but because the district could not offer me growth in something they did not believe in based on their words and actions and what they have repeatedly shown in their lack of words, actions, and policy change.

Although we told our son to live as his authentic self and to live in his full identity as unapologetically Black, every single day, I went home to my husband and son who have had to code-switch and check their emotions and full identities at the door all day long on the job and in our school district. These life experiences were raw and emotional, impacting me as a mom, a wife, and a leader. Hopefully, this afforded me empathy for what other families may be

experiencing. What this taught me and changed in me is that I have clarity about my core values and know I cannot compromise them. I looked at each woman at the table. All of them had watery, red eyes. I looked directly at Stephanie and said, “You know who I am as a person, and you know where my core values rest. So, all I ask of you is that you place me where you believe I can be successful.” I was done. There was nothing more for me to say.

There were a few seconds of silence, and Malita said, “Well, that brought out the tears!” My representative asked the room if we needed a tissue as she slid the box across the table toward Malita, having grabbed one herself. She turned to me and asked, “Do you need one?”

“No, I am fine,” I responded. I had spoken my truth.

My representative broke the silence by asking if there was anything more that needed to be said, and since there was nothing further, she told the women that I had curated a binder of evidence if they wanted to see it. I produced my blue 3-ring binder and slid it across the table to Monica, the HR director. She glanced at me and asked, “You put this together in *three* days?”

“Yes,” I responded.

At about the same time, Stephanie stood up and stated that she needed to address a situation that was evolving upstairs, and she excused herself. She thanked me for appearing and said one of them would be in touch with me shortly about the next steps, and she left the room. My representative and I departed together and waited until we were in the parking lot to say anything to each other. She said that all we could do was wait and see. She told me she was impressed by my calmness and composure. I responded that when you stand in your integrity and speak your truth, you can easily access your composure and draw on your strength.

I did not know then why the commotion upstairs drew Stephanie out of the conference room. What would come to light later that evening on the local news was that our School Board

President had resigned because of community backlash in response to his use of a racial slur at a district celebration the night before. I am downstairs defending my leadership that at least aspired to be rooted in culturally responsive practices. However, Stephanie had to leave the conversation to engage in damage control for one of the district's top leaders who had used a racial slur at dinner the night before. Likewise, the same day, my son came home from school carrying his yearbook into the living room. He wanted to talk through how many times the use of the N-word in several variations was sprinkled across the comments from White peers with whom he attended school, including the child of Jim who had used the N-word two years prior. Jim's comfort level with the N-word had been handed down to his child. My son's White peers' confidence in using the N-word as a term of endearment was breathtaking. As we sat as a family discussing how this made my son feel, I received a text message from Malita requesting that I return to district headquarters the next day at 4:15 p.m.

Once again, my representative and I arrived together and made our way up to the superintendent's suite, where Stephanie, the assistant superintendent welcomed us back. Her tone was so superficially jovial while we all settled into her office as if we were all there for a lady's lunch or something. She didn't waste much time, and with zest in her voice, Stephanie began by saying she felt they had found a solution. She quickly confirmed the things that were not changing. I would still be a member of the district administration employee group, I would still be working in an elementary school setting, and I would still retain my salary. The only change for me would be in title only, as I would move to another elementary school as assistant principal. She knew I still wanted to work with students. She knew I was friends with the principal there. She felt we would most likely work seamlessly together. She stated that she knew the dynamic of this elementary school could benefit from experienced leadership. She felt I

would be fine if I won over the union representative at this school. “It was a win-win for everyone,” she cheerfully exclaimed.

I quickly weighed all the moving parts in my mind for a minute. I didn’t say anything but offered a slight smile as an acknowledgment. My representative asked, “Well, that sounds fair for now, but what becomes of Chris a year from now?” Stephanie began to respond but then paused and said that she wanted to look into this further because “situations like this had been fucked up in the past.” Not that I ever aspired to, but I was now cognizant about why more women do not aspire to the superintendency. Women are tokenized to prevent ascension into district leadership roles unless they are willing to protect the district brand, and in this case, Stephanie was the gatekeeper.

The conversation shifted to logistics. This was the end of my leadership at Brookside and as an elementary principal, just like that. Stephanie suggested I take some time off and mark this as the start of my summer vacation. Go travel. Have fun! Focus on caring for my Mom here in town as needed. I could remove my personal effects from Brookside Elementary when I felt comfortable. However, I was not to attend the upcoming elementary principal meeting. I was not to attend the monthly district administration meeting. Stephanie would get back to me about the end-of-year celebration for administrators that would take place at the end of May. Stephanie would get back to me on the community announcement to be shared with the teachers in person the following day. She did not confirm when, but the timing was crucial because she claimed the superintendent had received over one hundred letters from angry parents in the school community.

Later that Friday afternoon, I received communication from Stephanie about the message that would go out on my behalf to the school community at some point the next day. The

message stated that I was leaving for personal reasons, as I believed it was best for the school and the community at this time. She was pleased to share that Caroline agreed to become the acting principal. Their goal was to take time and careful thought in selecting the next principal for the school and community. They were confident in the interim leader's ability to provide great care and leadership to support a successful finish to the 2018-19 school year. She went for the lie.

The principal I would be partners with was also told that Friday afternoon about my new assignment. We both knew intuitively not to speak to each other until the following Monday. She was so gracious and even seemed excited to be partnering with me. We spoke briefly, and she assured me she would have my back. I reassured her I would put my best foot forward for this new community. The next day, I planned to attend dinner with three colleagues. I had nothing to hide or be ashamed of, but the energy it took to keep those plans felt overwhelming. One of the three colleagues knew what was happening and encouraged me to attend. I had no plans to discuss what was going on with my situation, and my friend knew this as well. Let the narrative play out on its own. It would be public soon enough.

We sat outside on the patio near the front door. We had just ordered our food when I looked to my left and noticed one of my supportive Black parents standing at the door's threshold. This was the parent who felt unwelcome by the PTCO prior to the dance event. She was waiting for me to lock eyes with her. She pulled down her sunglasses, and I saw tears rolling down her face. I felt her pain in my throat and stomach. I quietly excused myself from the table and approached the parent. She outstretched her arms and drew me in for a hug. So, the news was out to the community already. I suddenly felt so exposed.

She asked if I was okay and said she read the community announcement and knew what must have happened to me. “They lied about you!” She knew better. I didn’t share details other than she knew who I was as a leader, and she knew what I stood for and that I would be fine. It took everything to remain composed when we said goodbye, and I returned to my table. I looked visibly upset, but I assured the group I was okay. Then, the first text came through. Then another. Then another. Then another. Then another. And another. And another. They kept coming. These were from both colleagues and teachers, past and present. Each person was asking what was going on and if I was okay. I was overwhelmed by the support but somehow still felt utterly alone.

The colleague sitting across from me gently reached across the table, set my phone down, and reached for my hand, asking what was wrong. Being the only White woman at the table, I didn’t want to appear weak or attention-seeking, so I pulled my hands away from her. The table went silent. I was silent. I held the gaze of my close friend for support. I will never forget the comfort that discreet gesture afforded me. She still saw me as fully human, and her strength and understanding gave me strength and validation. After several seconds, I could put some words together to share the facts of what had just gone public.

I felt too scared, to be fully honest. I only shared something brief, like what I had just shared with the mom I had spoken to moments ago, but my colleagues knew better. Over the year, we all shared stories, reached out to consult with each other, and offered each other support. They knew the more prominent themes I faced as a school leader. I stated that I wanted to be professional in this transition and keep my words to a minimum. The narrative would be what it would be, but I felt no need to chase it down. They asked about their role in supporting me. They were so kind. I just said that they already had. I didn’t want them to feel they needed to

say or do anything on my behalf. I would just have to ride this out right now. I had so many conflicting feelings that I needed to sort out and didn't have the words or energy for more. We eventually finished our dinner together. I appreciated the dignity each one of these ladies offered me. We hugged and departed.

I planned to go to the school and gather my items from my Brookside office the following Friday. I had been advised by someone I trusted to request either Malita or district security to be present as I collected my belongings. I did not want to put myself in a position of being on the receiving end of any accusations about property or my behavior in any way. I requested that I be able to complete this task after the daycare employees left so I could be in and out of the empty building efficiently and without interruption or even further humiliation.

Malita was sent to Brookside to meet with me at 6:30 p.m. She arrived with her husband, as did I. Her husband remained in the car. Mine did not. As my husband and I entered the lobby, she greeted us with a nerve-filled, high-pitched salutation. Her voice sounded like her teeth were coated in saccharine syrup as she tried to choke out fake small talk as if she had rolled out the red carpet for us. She even held the school's front door open as we made our trips in and out. Just let me get my shit out of here and keep it professional, I thought to myself.

Shortly after that, I was required to appear at the new school for a formal introduction as their new assistant principal. The building principal could not have been more gracious in introducing me to the new staff. As my colleague and peer, she offered me dignity and grace, introducing me as an equal partner as a "second principal" with all the expertise and none of the training needed. She didn't have to do that. She had dealt with her challenges as a leader in the past, and we had a shared camaraderie and trust. Now, we would develop our working

relationship and friendship. I drove home to the deafening sound of silence and invisibility for the next six weeks.

Sometimes, during the deafening silence, I would grab a quiet bite to eat or walk with trusted accomplices, which was helpful. Extremely helpful. Along with my husband and son, I realized that critical friends and mentors still saw me as human. For their humanity, I will always be eternally grateful. However, knowledge and personal growth can force a deep depression and rage you must push through to move to a place of internal peace. I had read about these humiliating situations. I had witnessed horrendous situations directed at peers at work. I had listened to the feelings of dehumanized peers, friends, and family members. I had also been responsible for causing horrendous pain to others. However, I had strong mentors and thought partners who never left my side, who helped me see my responsibilities and worth as a human.

Nevertheless, I didn't want to leave the house during those six weeks of isolation. My husband pushed me through this. He was my rock. So was my son. I should not be ashamed about a single thing, they said. Plaster on a smile, hold my head high, and get out there. My husband would drag me to the store or out to dinner. I did not want to be seen anywhere unless I was with my husband. I was terrified. When I could not be feisty, my husband was feisty for me.

I felt a palpable connection to and empathy toward Isabel Wilkerson from page 41 of *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Are Middle-Class Blacks Angry?* She was the only Black woman in that airport shuttle in a dangerous state of an imbalance of power with the White police officers and White patrons around her. I respectfully knew I could not fully imagine what it felt like to be a Black woman in that circumstance who was wondering if what she was experiencing felt anything like being raped. However, I felt this connection to her as a White woman who had been raped and could scream back at her, "Yes! That is *exactly* how it feels!" I

fell back into the emotional state of my eighteen-year-old self and the emotions I had gone through after surviving a rape at gunpoint my senior year of high school. In 1991, I also spent several weeks at home, missing class, missing my senior cruise trip, reflecting alone in my room, and trying to strategize how to find the strength to handle my return to school. I had a strong core group of friends, but they could not offset my isolation, raw pain, anger, terror, and sense of aloneness. Who wants to hear about a teenaged girl coping with relentless nightmares and crying alone in the shower when we are supposed to be living our best lives, embarking on our next chapter of college living? We were supposed to be creating the soundtrack of our lives. To soothe my soul, I listened to music ranging from Prince to Pink Floyd, but the entire grunge music genre carried me through most days in 1991. I took to relentless journaling to ease my mind.

Twenty-eight years later, I was back in a similar emotional state, feeling naked, exposed, raw, isolated, angry, alienated, and afraid whenever I left my home. I was constantly thinking of strategies should I run into someone I didn't favor. Am I smiling? Do I appear unbothered? Do I appear strong? I immersed myself in literature and long walks while listening to music. When I returned home, I often realized my mind had wandered so far that I could not recall one song I listened to over a five-mile walk. When I didn't want to burden my family with my pain, I would again cry alone in the shower, letting the hot steam melt away the pain. To cope with a racing mind, I would journal about my thoughts and try to strategize how I would cope with my return to the workplace.

Eventually, Stephanie reached out about our final administration celebration at the end of May. I was to attend. I was put on display to warn others not to use their voice like I had. I could not sleep the night before. My stomach ached. My new principal partner was again gracious to

time our arrival thoughtfully so we could enter the event together. I felt direct stares or backs turn as we approached an open table with some available seating. I was also acutely aware of where I was placing my own eyes. We went through the buffet line, and people chatted with each other on both sides of me. Yes, I had allies who greeted me unapologetically. I just felt numb. I wanted to get to my seat and prepare myself to get through the next two hours.

Finally, the celebrations began. Everyone who was moving on or moving to a new position was acknowledged. I did not know how or if this would be addressed in my situation. I felt the proverbial walls of this large outdoor tent closing in on me because I realized how this would be addressed. It was not. In one final act of humiliation, I remained a glaring question mark with peers staring in my direction throughout the event. I found myself constantly averting my eyes. This felt like emotional rape. It wasn't until the following morning that Stephanie communicated to all my peers regarding my reassignment:

“In an ongoing effort to keep you informed, we want to inform you that this message went out to the Confetti Elementary community earlier this month. Chris Toliver will serve as the Assistant Principal for the upcoming school year. As always, please treat this information with the utmost professionalism.”

Following the email announcement about my reassignment as an assistant principal, another wave of private support or curiosity would continue for days through text and phone calls. I would cut and paste the exact text response to each text inquiry. As the circle widened beyond my core group of trusted friends to the status of those who felt more like an acquaintance, I knew their inquiry was about me making them feel better about my situation for their sake, not mine. I had to figure out how to carry this journey in my soul and still be a productive and present school leader in the new community I was to serve. I knew I had to keep

working on reducing any remaining remnants of arrogance in my heart that had allowed me to cause pain in others. Arrogance must be replaced with humility. I kept thinking about the mentorship and support I had received over the last few years and the concept of sustaining dignity for others, which is rooted in sustaining humility within myself. Dignity should be at the core of all equity work. Dignity has the right to maintain your self-worth. False dignity is displaced self-worth dependent on an external source rather than realizing that your dignity resides within you. When you do not know the difference, you project outward and dehumanize and demoralize others to maintain what you think is your dignity in the name of equity. You cannot maintain your dignity while violating the dignity of another human being. Changemakers should be cognizant of this to avoid systemic damage and individual trauma. To engage otherwise is to accept and perpetuate white supremacy, allowing supremacy to cheerfully function by design by dividing us through complicit silence, oppression, sub-oppression, and tokenism. We must choose to unite to guarantee democracy for everyone.

As I tossed and turned, trying to sleep the night before my final evaluation meeting, I was reflecting on the culture and climate among administrators over the last few years in this district. I recall the lack of dignity at play in our work environment. At this point in my career, I had been working in this district since 1997 as a daycare assistant director at Sycamore Elementary, seven years as a classroom teacher at Crestwood Elementary, four years as an assistant principal at Heartlake Elementary, followed by seven years as a principal at Sycamore Elementary and one year at Brookside Elementary before being demoted to assistant principal. Once I left the classroom at Crestwood and moved on to serve in my first role as an elementary assistant principal at Heartlake, I never questioned whether I would remain gainfully employed. By definition, administrators were at-will employees, but the culture was to grow their leaders from

within the district. Once I moved into administration, my trajectory would be to attain a principalship. Once promoted to principal at Sycamore, I felt highly secure that my employment was a given. I knew that unless I made an egregious error, I was not worried about getting a contract from year to year. It was strongly implied that I was secure in my employment. I knew of colleagues who had breached policies or were ineffective leaders who remained employed year after year, so for someone like me who had zero disciplinary violations or incidents of misconduct, it never dawned on me to question my employment status year to year.

As a rule follower, I didn't question my status because I believe that district leadership allowed a laissez-faire culture where male employees were treated differently than female employees where routine crass, inappropriate, or harassing behavior was common. There was even a male table at monthly meetings for elementary principals, and it was an unspoken understanding that women preferred not to sit at that table due to the conversations that would often surface with the good ol' boys' club. One day earlier in my career, I ended up at the table. A Black male colleague told me that my husband was not the father of my child. It had to be our colleague seated right next to me during this conversation. He jokingly claimed that since the colleague sitting next to me was Biracial and that my son was Biracial, that accounted for his paternity of my child. None of the men at the table intervened regarding the comment, including the Biracial the colleague was seated next to me. I never further discussed the incident rooted in racist and sexual overtones. I did not ever sit at that table again.

As a woman, you had a role to play in the patriarchy of the district, which I initially played willingly. If you played the game, you were protected. Once you began to question things, you were no longer protected. The brand of the district was protected. It was common knowledge that one of our White male colleagues engaged in "Crazy Hair Day," during which he

took a photo of a staff member of color wearing an afro. It was an inappropriate and racially insensitive example of what crazy hair includes. These examples of indiscretion filtered down to this principal's staff, where at least one White male teacher felt comfortable wearing a holiday sweater with the phrase, "Where are my hoes at?" The teacher posed for a picture with his female colleagues while proudly sporting the sweater.

Other jokes with sexual overtones were commonplace at our monthly meetings for elementary principals. We were placed into groups to write holiday songs as a competition during the holidays, with the lyrics always crossing the line. Colleagues would wear holiday sweaters with sexually suggestive imagery, such as a holiday sweater with a snowman with a carrot on the sweater representing male genitalia. We were also placed on teams to play holiday games, often leading to inappropriate language or suggestive acts. One game was placing a ball into a pair of women's hose. A contestant would hold the leg of the hose at waist height and thrust their pelvis forward to swing the ball at the foot of the hose, then hit bowling pins for points. References about thrusting or men's "balls" resulted from these types of games.

We would also have a segment entitled "You Can't Make This Shit Up," where colleagues would tell stories about incidents in their school community. One White assistant principal retold a story of a mom in his school community wherein the question surfaced about whether her "rug" matched her "drapes" – did her hair color match her genitalia?

Our male colleagues shared indiscretions, and their behaviors were open secrets. We learned that this same assistant principal got caught having sex with a teacher in a mobile classroom, resulting in a lateral move for him to serve as an assistant principal in another building, but not a demotion in leadership. From one of our superintendents down to school leaders, affairs between administrators and teachers they supervised or affairs with other peers in

the administration were open secrets. Nevertheless, these men retained their leadership positions in the district or moved on to successful employment elsewhere. Ineffective leadership from our male colleagues was well-known. It felt commonplace that female leaders or leaders of any race could be easily tokenized to uphold the racist, misogynistic patriarchy in this district.

It is my position that I was retaliated against for questioning infractions that were both racially insensitive and sexually inappropriate at the hands of my colleagues or upper leadership. It is my position that I was retaliated against for being vocal about my inability to stand behind two inadequate and racially insensitive literacy resources on which the district was positioned to spend \$10 million. It is my position that I was set up and placed at an elementary school where I was tasked with the nearly impossible mission of cleaning up after a corrupt White male principal unless I intended to remain a tokenized female leader who protected the district's brand in the process. While principal at Brookside Elementary, I feel I was equally retaliated against for speaking out as a parent regarding my concern for the canon of literature at my son's high school, where my son was experiencing racialized trauma in the classroom. With a narrative crafted for the Brookside community and my colleagues that I had chosen to step down from my role as principal, I was demoted without cause. I did not engage in any misconduct. I had no disciplinary actions filed against me. I was now a former district school principal placed in a demoted position without cause or due process, which did not happen with male administrators. They moved up, were tucked away in human resource roles or otherwise, or successfully moved on in the field of education.

For my final evaluation meeting, I was to meet my representative in the parking lot of district headquarters so we could walk in together. As I parked my vehicle, I received a call from her. She had a family emergency and could not join me. So, I took a deep breath in and made my

way into the building. The receptionist kindly greeted me, and I was escorted back to Malita's office. I protectively sat on the couch as she sat behind me on the couch at her desk. She began by saying she had talked to the assistant superintendent because she was struggling with this evaluation. When she looked at the language literally, she felt he had conjured up the best evaluation she could muster. She said she had been asking about the next steps since I would go to another school in a different position. She was told who the supervisor of the new school was but that the building principal would be my direct supervisor. She had asked if I needed an improvement plan but was told by the assistant superintendent that there was no need. I had come out "Effective" on the evaluation rubric except for those little pocket areas around climate, culture, and relationships, the same features I had been asked to share in Crystal's evaluation. She asked if there was anything else she was supposed to do with any documentation, and the answer she got was that unless these concerns came up with the principal and colleague I would be working with, it would be my new supervisor's call. Between the building principal and the building supervisor, they would discuss the next steps. Professionally speaking, I felt Malita's evaluation ratings stemmed from a limited perspective rooted in hearsay. If I gave a teacher those ratings, I would have to have a much broader breadth of evidence behind the scores. I recognized that this was the story that she needed to tell. She responded with a quick "Yeah." She knew the narrative was a lie. She retorted that there was so much stuff we could go back and forth around, but when teachers shared all this evidence she had, that says otherwise...she tapered off. I responded that I thought a lot about what I would say. I felt that because I never had a mid-year review, I never had a chance to respond to allegations I never knew existed. I told her I felt like there had been levels to this process that felt retaliatory, but I would remain professional. She had the right to her perspective and opinion on my leadership, but I knew my historical

reputation before this year and I knew my capacity as a school leader. I chose to be respectful in the conversation while declining to receive some of her evaluation comments around my inability to build relationships and sustain a healthy school culture and climate. She said she understood my perspective, but she was only going off the information she had. She said she didn't have a counternarrative available to her. She went for the lie. I reminded her I had provided a big blue evidence binder as a counternarrative. She paused, remembering, and uttered, "Yeah." She assured me the HR director would put a copy of my evaluation and the binder for my personnel file. She wished me the best in my transition to the new school as an assistant principal, condescendingly adding that she hoped that today's chat would not be a recurring conversation I would have to have again. She reminded me that the following year was a fresh start and, hopefully, a healthy start. She confirmed that it sounded like things were going well, and she appreciated my attitude in wanting to do what was best for the kids there. She knew the principal would appreciate that also. I reminded Malita that putting students first was all I had done my entire career.

I stated that I would attach my summary report to our online evaluation platform as evidence. I asked Malita what she wanted me to do about the mid-year review that never took place, resulting in a lack of due process. Should I make a notation that we did not meet? She insisted that the mid-year review did take place. She swiveled in her chair, and her fingernails clicked quickly against her computer keyboard as she logged into the evaluation platform to show me the evidence. As she navigated the tabs on her computer screen, Malita continued to think aloud, insisting she knew the date we met and talked about my school's year-long plan of action. She added that she did not review my ratings because she didn't have enough information to give me ratings. She stated that she didn't do any ratings for any of her principals. I clarified

that although a date in January was listed on the calendar, we never did meet. She continued fumbling around on her computer, checking her calendar, insisting and repeating that we had gone over my year-long plan. Yes, we did meet in November. She had been out to some staff meetings, but that was it. She again repeated, “I know we met.” She finally located her list of dates and stated, “See? I was out at your school on August 27th, September 19th and... (long pause)... May 15. At this point, she blamed her assistant, saying, “Well, I’m going off of these dates that...um...I have from my assistant, and looking at my calendar, I have down that we met.”

I took a deep breath slowly and quietly before responding, “So, in January, we did not meet. If we had met, I would have signed off on my mid-year review.”

She kept toggling between her calendar and the online evaluation platform. I continued to wait as she began to realize she had never completed my evaluation cycle.

“I have your summary. I wrote a summary. All I can see is that...uh...that we were supposed to meet. I have a note that in here that says, ‘I will meet with Chris on January 21 to cover these topics.’”

I took another silent, slow, deep breath, “We never met, and I never signed off on my mid-year evaluation.”

“I wonder why we didn’t meet. My assistant is usually good about rescheduling these.” Did her assistant have many meetings that had to be rescheduled? I wondered.

“No, we didn’t meet. Remember, you and I met right after the elementary principal’s monthly meeting in January. We sat in the hallway. You were wearing yellow. We discussed what was going on with Jocelyn.”

“Okay, let’s see here...okay, well, let me do some digging and see if I find anything different. I could have sworn I had your...um...your mid-year, but I’m not seeing anything right now. I’m not sure if I’m looking in the right place. It was just one sentence, like the mid-year, you know, like we were going to meet.”

“We didn’t meet,” I replied.

I thanked her for her time, got up to leave, and returned to my vehicle in less than eight minutes.

About one year later, someone reached out to me because a similar circumstance was playing out with a colleague of mine. The same formula had been used to remove another White female administrator from her leadership position as an elementary school principal. She asked if my salary had been reduced because of my demotion because a salary reduction had been confirmed for her once she completed her first year in a demoted role as an assistant principal. I confirmed that my salary had not changed. I quoted the parting words I was left with from my demotion meeting. My salary would remain in place, and someone would get back to me if there were any changes since “situations like this had been fucked up in the past.” I gave my colleague permission to share this information back to HR.

The following week, I received an email from an HR specialist informing me that my salary for the upcoming school year would be reduced to the assistant principal salary schedule. Of course, they had an HR specialist send this to me. It helped paint a picture that this was the plan all along. It was cowardly. I responded:

I hope all is well with you. Thank you so much for this communication. However, since being reassigned from Principal to Assistant Principal, this is the first communication I

have received that this would result in a salary reduction, as reflected by my current salary. Any information you could provide as to why would be appreciated.

The HR specialist responded:

To my understanding, your reassignment from Principal to Assistant Principal at current salary was only for one year, and then your salary was to be adjusted to the AP pay range. I apologize that you were not aware of this salary adjustment, and unfortunately, I do not have any additional information beyond knowing that retaining your current salary would be for one year only.

She asked me to contact Monica. So, I reached out to her:

Good afternoon, I am reaching out to you regarding my message to the HR specialist below to see if you have any insight as to why this was not previously communicated to me. Thank you for any insight you can provide.

Monica responded:

Thanks, Chris, for your email, and I hope you are getting some time off after a crazy spring. When we met last May, this issue was discussed. We stated during the meeting that we would honor your current principal salary for one year only. After the year, we would do a market adjustment to meet your new role – Assistant Principal. The quote that we sent you on June 2, 2020, is your adjusted base annual salary for the 2020-2021 school year. Let me know if you have further questions. I have included the assistant superintendent on this email since she was in the meeting.

I responded:

Good morning, No future salary reduction was ever discussed during the May 2019 meeting with the Stephanie, Malita, and my representative to discuss my reassignment.

Stephanie then responded:

Hi Chris, In the meeting, you asked if your pay would change, and I responded that it would be held the same for the year but that it would reflect the Assistant Principal's pay the following year. I'm sorry for any misunderstanding. This has been the pattern for all administrators moved from principal to assistant principal positions.

She went for the lie.

I responded:

Hi, respectfully speaking, in the meeting, you confirmed that I was being reassigned as an Assistant Principal, that I would remain a member of our administration team, and that my salary would remain the same. My representative asked what would become of me a year from now. You began to respond but then paused and said that you wanted to look into this further, as 'situations like this had been fucked up in the past.' No salary reduction was discussed then, or at any point after, until I received the adjusted salary email from the HR assistant on June 3, 2020.

Stephanie did not respond, Monica responded:

Chris – the quote that we sent you on June 2, 2020, is your adjusted base annual salary for the 2020-2021 school year as an assistant principal. Thanks.

Although furious, I hit the pause button and I did not respond to afford me some level of protection against accusations of retaliation directed at me or acts of retaliation directed against me. I decided to leave it there in June of 2020. Their lies were working for now.

Three years later in early Fall of 2023, yet again, we were hosting a panel of marginalized students who had come to share their experiences as students in our district. Some stories were heartwarming, but most required these students to recall traumatic racialized events they had

endured at their schools. We had engaged in this exercise year after year. We listened to these students pour out their hearts with the naïve hope that their willingness to share their stories might cause a change in the system. After the students shared their perspectives, we would break into smaller groups to debrief and discuss how our leadership was impacted or could be improved to cause less harm to our marginalized students. Crystal was facilitating my group. At my table, I expressed my concern that we had been working on diversity, equity, and inclusion for 20 years and had yet to change a policy. I stated that I would not ask my son to participate on a student panel like this because I would not want to give him false hope that his willingness to be brave and vulnerable would result in systemic change.

As I spoke, Crystal was nearby listening. As I concluded my comments, she brought each table group back to the more extensive group discussion, saying, “Chris just stated something that everyone in this room should hear.” She paraphrased what I said, concluding that if we as leaders do not change, these student testimonials would be for naught. I saw no lie in her statement.

Analysis

Gladwell (2018) stated that a token succeeds at the cost of her dignity. Up until recently, that is precisely what I had been doing. The journey I have been taking to disengage from the traditional role a White woman plays in patriarchy serves to answer my second research question: *How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?*

At this stage in my white racial frame development, I used CRT and CWS to see three broad themes emerge because the earworms repeated like three songs: Racial Permanence, Lack of Interest Convergence, and Tokenism.

Racial Permanence

At the macro level, white supremacy is the air we breathe and is a permanent fixture of American society (Bell, 1995a). I contend that everything that occurs at the meso and micro levels is a microcosm of the macro influence of white supremacy in our nation. Once I understood this, I no longer felt the need to opt for safety provided by my whiteness, instead wanting to choose life (Baldwin, 1984). When I got out of my white comfort zone and started using my voice, we experienced small peaks of progress (Bell, 1995a). The special services team at Brookside was invited into a race-based conversation by Jocelyn so she could address the impact of the racial mobbing she was experiencing. My role was to listen and believe and join her in conversation. My son and approximately 140 eleventh graders with the same AP Language teacher did not read *Adventures of Huck Finn*. My role was to listen to my son and use my voice as his parent. After a few of us spoke up, our district leaders abandoned plans to purchase an inadequate and racially insensitive literacy resource. Our role was to use our voices to protect students from a curriculum rooted in deficit language. I reference these as minor disruptions because, through the lens of CRT, I know that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life (Matsuda et al., 1993). Bell's (1980) racial realism concept states that racism is indestructible and will always be an imperative and permanent fixture of American society.

Beyond relationships and curriculum, white supremacy also prevails under the guise of traditions. The Brookside teachers and their community pushed back about class parties and wanted to sustain the essence of Thanksgiving and Christmas because that is how it had always been. In a school setting, exclusion was first demonstrated by completely refusing Black people access to education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Over time, exclusion existed in the form of segregated schools. Following desegregation, exclusion existed through tracking systems to

repurpose or intentionally track gifted programs, honors programs, and advanced placement classes to make them more accessible to White students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I contend that exclusion continues today through the dog whistle politics of classroom parties and daily educational practices. CRT would argue that this is because racism is normal and not easily cured because it is not acknowledged (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CWS illuminates the idea that by holding on to certain traditions at the exclusion of other perspectives and cultures, the Brookside community employed whiteness as property through their rights to use and enjoyment and the absolute right to exclude others in school traditions (Harris, 1993).

I believe staff members of Brookside Elementary demonstrated whiteness as property to exclude others and hold onto their traditions by weaponizing my voice in a way that might protect their agenda—for example, telling a student that I would not allow students to take art supplies to recess. The teacher had a pattern of going out of her way to meet the needs of her White students and families while quickly shutting down the interests of marginalized students. She was also fond of pilgrim costumes. Likewise, the Brookside PTCO President weaponized my voice to suggest I forbade weekend events to put district pressure on me to continue the tradition of Saturday game nights.

Through the lens of CRT, to disrupt white supremacy and effectively lead others toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011) and “develop the political will to breach the contractual expectations of white supremacy” (Shah et al., 2022, p. 461). However, through the lens of CWS, Feagin (2013) argued that only individuals who engage in sustained self-reflection about their White racial frame would be better prepared to disrupt white supremacy. When we do not reflect, when we do not apply new learning, when we do not speak up, we cause harm. I had with

Crystal. Instead, we maintain exclusive traditions. We use outdated or insensitive curricula. We use racial slurs. We demand to be coddled through 90-minute meetings to justify why we are stuck in our racial permanence. We become White teachers who humiliate students who do not look like us. We get defensive about race with our colleagues at special services meetings. We protect mediocre White men. We over-police. We exclude members of our community who do not look like us. We tokenize marginalized people. We isolate, silence, and dehumanize accomplices who try to disrupt oppressive systems. We lie. At the very least, we scare children with racist pilgrim costumes; at our worst, we cost someone their life. So, as we delve into the concept of interest convergence, we can see how the principle offers insight into the ongoing battle against the permanence of racism.

Interest Convergence

CRT asserts that the interests of White people and people of color must converge for racial progress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Likewise, CRT aspires to eliminate racial oppression as part of the broader focus toward ending all forms of inequity (Matsuda et al., 1993). CRT also maintains the perspective of the interest convergence principle that posits that Black people only make gains against racial oppression when their interests converge with those of White elites (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

At the meso level, the roadblock is the community's resistance to interest convergence in this district. Bell (2000) offered two rules to explain this resistance: (a) society will always sacrifice the rights of Black people in order to protect the political or economic interests of White people, and (b) society will only recognize the rights of Black people and other oppressed groups when and only if the recognition benefits the political or economic interests of White people. Bell (1979) further explained that this cost stems from White people's perception that

educational opportunities were limited, and they felt threatened. This is why the meetings Malita wanted to have about possible offensive content in all K12 libraries suddenly disappeared from all our calendars. This is why the literacy committee was disbanded.

So, partnering with an interracial family and White staff members to navigate the removal of a controversial book series from the Brookside school library, addressing the canon of literature at my son's high school, and speaking out against a weak and undignified literacy resource the district wanted to purchase all seemed to fall into a delicate space of trying to cultivate interest convergence within a district culture resistant to change. Nevertheless, our district did an excellent job of communicating a lie that appeared to convey to our stakeholders that they valued interest convergence through the window dressing of the district's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work with parents. However, "when it comes to matters like these, it is likely that people will reach a conclusion about school inequity that aligns with their racial frame and assigns the least amount of blame to themselves, allowing them to preserve their sense of self" (Cobb, 2017, p. 95). Lakoff (2004) stated that mental frames providing structures for how we see the world and that you can only understand what those frames allow. I believe our parent DEI meetings were informed by a diversity frame rather than an equity frame. Bensimon (2005) shared that a diversity mindset aims to focus on the representation of differences, celebrate diversity, and foster an awareness of white privilege through workshop models (p. 102). A mindset of equity seeks to focus on institutional practices and unequal outcomes for minority group students and develop institutional accountability of equitable educational outcomes (Bensimon, 2005, p. 102). I contend that through feigned interest convergence, our district's DEI initiatives were built on sand because of their unwillingness to analyze the impact of the DEI approaches because they would rather pretend their initiatives were working (Dover

et al., 2020; Hansen, 2003). This unwillingness is particularly true in organizations like this district, where DEI activities serve as window dressing while having zero impact on truly redistributing power equitably by design (Hansen, 2003; Ray, 2019). While interest convergence has the potential to foster systemic change, it can also give rise to the complexities of tokenism.

Tokenism

The final feature of white supremacy that seemed to play out in this critical autoethnography occurred at the micro level. In education, everyday micro events are demonstrated in the practices of teachers and administrators and expose internalized manifestations of institutionalized racism (Holt, 1995). The system of white supremacy uses tokens like little ants in a racist ant farm, scurrying about with the key mission to sustain institutional racism. A token is the social construction of a person who functions as a medium of exchange where resistance, politics, and group identity are traded for cultural and economic power in popular or influential spaces (Cloud, 1996). Tokenism is not one-sided because the person in the role has to demonstrate that they have overcome any oppression from their membership in a subordinate group (Cloud, 1996). In the system of white supremacy, I argue that you are either on offense as a token, charged with sustaining white supremacy, or you are on defense, becoming the target of tokenism when trying to broker opportunities for interest convergence. The only intersection I had with a marginalized group as a White person was that I identified as female. Aspects of identity, such as race and gender, do not operate in isolation but are interconnected (Chang & Culp, 2002). Individual members of society represent multiple identities and perform those identities in a variety of ways, never knowing for sure to which of these identities others react (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

When I was given the role to function as a White female token, I had proven that I had overcome roadblocks as a female to be accepted into the leagues of those who held the most power in our district – White men. Or so I thought. The district just placed me in a leadership role to demonstrate that they did not discriminate against women. That is until I stopped performing my duties as a token to stay silent unless I was protecting the district brand.

I now understood that systemic disruption required personal reflection to understand the impact of white supremacy in education and recognize one's white privilege within a system rooted in white supremacy. Toure and Dorsey (2018) argued that school leaders leave the dominant frame of white supremacy unchallenged through their silence, limiting teacher pedagogy and student learning opportunities. The authors affirmed that school leaders are vital in sustaining or disrupting practices that uphold racism. I contend that when I engaged in White racial identity development and began to develop the political will to disrupt white supremacy, discontinuing my compliant, submissive, and silent behavior and instead presenting as a vocal equity-minded school leader, my newly formed marginalized perspective contributed to my career demise. As I changed as a person and a leader, I found myself in a similar predicament I had placed others both consciously and unconsciously. As predicted, when I moved from an offensive position as a token to the defensive side as the object of tokenization, I became the target of the school community, my staff, and my supervisor, resulting in my demotion and removal from the leadership position as Brookside Elementary's principal.

Because white supremacy is an ideology, anyone can ascribe to upholding its pillars. Through the lens of CRT, I know that "white supremacy is a project of psychic conditioning and toxic belonging" (Okun, 2021, p. 3). Through the lens of CWS's concept that claims whiteness functions as property, I know that the rights of disposition concept suggests that whiteness is a

right only White people can have, but because property rights are considered alienable or transferable, whiteness can be conferred (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Alexia and Anthony were tokenized within the system of white supremacy when they embraced the whiteness conferred to them to engage in the toxic belonging of the district when they protected and defended Jim's use of the N-word for shock value purposes. Stephanie and Monica performed their duties beautifully as White female tokens to uphold the district brand by oppressing me as a fellow female colleague because I no longer fit the token role assigned to me. As a Latina female, Malita had to contend with two intersections of oppression within her identity, both gender and race, in order to aspire to the tokenized role in which she found herself. By executing the demands of district leaders to remove me from my leadership position, she was only doing exactly what the system of white supremacy expected of her. Our district used the socially constructed concept of race to create whiteness and a racialized and gendered hierarchy and political system to define who was seen as fully human and who was not (Okun, 2021). Swanson and Welton (2019) stated, "Existing research...does not fully capture the political challenges and possible stakeholder pushback that White principals may be up against when confronting whiteness in their school communities" (p. 734). White school leaders have to be prepared for this dynamic. "Whiteness will counterpunch and try to knock you out because whiteness is consumed by its own self-interest" (Genao & Mercedes, 2021, p. 135). Whiteness is consumed with its own lie.

I learned the hard way that I could not focus on reforming others; I could only continue to focus on reforming myself, and that to do so would be lifelong work, which felt daunting.

"Given what we know about interest convergence, belief, care and perhaps even a possessive investment in an antiracist white identity, may be insufficient for compelling White

suburban leaders to enact social justice” (Irby et al., 2019, p. 206). However, I was compelled to engage in social justice leadership. Taking the position that racism is a permanent feature in our society, Irby et al. (2019) stated that true racial reform in education depends on a leader’s ability to help teachers understand the “why” for changing their behaviors in response to racial realities in school. This is where I struggled. I could not always convince others of the “why,” which also contributed to my demise. Was it because I had no support, or was I deficient in my delivery?

Within that system of power and privilege, I reflected on the research conducted by Irby et al. (2019). Upon reflection, I noted there were similarities between the White female principal, Elizabeth, and me. Comparable to my experience, Elizabeth’s White staff members formed an underground group to survey the staff in response to these equity reforms. This underground group was formed in response to recent policy changes Elizabeth had made that they believed resulted in undeserving Black and Hispanic/Latine students—whom they believed were incapable of higher levels of learning—getting enrolled in advanced courses. Further, identical to my experience, the underground group of White staff members formed a Facebook page with White parents who deemed the school out of control. Elizabeth felt betrayed and disappointed and felt her efforts were futile when explaining that equity work did not mean favoritism.

However, there are areas where Elizabeth and I differ. To lead educators effectively on a path toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Burns (2019) highlighted that school leaders must first engage in their racial identity development and familiarize themselves with critical epistemologies to lead effectively. Leaders can only lead what they understand. Elizabeth had yet to engage in her white racial identity development. The authors also found that Elizabeth

held many negative emotions about her white racial identity, which influenced her perception of engaging in equity work.

Along with guilt and confusion, Elizabeth also found the thought of white racial backlash overwhelming. I have since learned from my own experience how important it is for White women to have a healthy white racial identity. This is a journey I will be on for the rest of my life, but the healthier I get in understanding who I am as a person, the less harm I will cause others. Irby et al. (2019) made the following argument: “White leaders in suburban schools should anticipate the possibilities that, should they undertake leadership for racial equity, their white professional and personal lives may get a little bit worse before they get better, if at all” (p. 207). The authors suggested that further research would “bring forth an opportunity for Elizabeth to explore her white values, partially discard them, and take her losses—friends, status in the community, comfort—in the process” (Irby et al., 2019, p. 207). This study by Irby et al. (2019), suggested further research would allow Elizabeth to explore her white values more, no matter the personal cost, illustrates the CWS stance regarding the importance of White school leaders engaging in ongoing white racial identity development.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze my own leadership experiences as a White cisgender female elementary school principal and how my white privilege contributed to maintaining white supremacy and systemic racism. The purpose was also to explore the impact of the evolution of my white racial frame and intentionally break my silence about white supremacy and systemic racism over the 2018–2019 school year. The following research questions guided the study:

- Q1 How did my white privilege foster whiteness and contribute to white supremacy and systemic racism?
- Q2 How did my white racial frame evolve, and how did that evolution shape my leadership practice?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical White Studies (CWS) provided the framework of analysis using a narrative structure to develop four critical essays at the micro level of an individual leader in a school district. Qualitative data were drawn from personal memory, documents, and vignettes. Using the analytical method of writing as inquiry (Mitchell & Clark, 2021), I discovered elements of the narrative related to the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and tokenism. This discussion is divided into two sections. The first section will explore the following implications of this study related to: (a) permanence of racism; (b) interest convergence; and (c) tokenism. The second section will explore the following recommendations for further research: (a) intersectionality; (b) power dynamics; and (c) narrative structures.

Implications

This second section will explore recommendations for further research. I had a surface-level understanding that societal systems and structures impacted my own micro level experience as a school leader. I decided to study myself rather than study other White female school leaders. I theorized that if I could understand my experiences through the tenets of CRT and the features of CWS while taking into consideration the impact of the macro and meso levels of society, this discernment would allow me to understand my journey through the lens of realism and humility rather than a superficial lens that clings to naivete and arrogance.

I understood that racism was a permanent fixture of our society at the macro level, and I recognized that race was a factor in my story at the micro level. Robinson (1999) explained “it is rare that a White person has an experience that causes them to assess their attitudes about being a racial being” (p. 88). However, this study highlighted four critical moments that demanded I assess my attitudes about being a racial being and directed my attention to reflect on my white racial identity. I was unsure which CRT tenets or CWS concepts would surface during the data analysis process. However, three concepts emerged as relevant to the narrative: permanence of racism, interest convergence, and tokenism. The relationship among these three concepts lies in how they interact to maintain white supremacy. Recognizing how these concepts emerged within the four critical essays is essential to understanding the relationship between these features and how they interacted together to sustain white supremacy and protect the school district's brand.

Permanence of Racism

CRT asserts that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life (Matsuda et al., 1993). White supremacy is the air we breathe and is a permanent fixture of American society (Bell, 1995a). The permanence of racism at the macro level of society intentionally impacts the

systems and structures of the meso level and the lived experiences of small groups and individuals at the micro level of education. Crystal's presence at Sycamore Elementary was enough to elicit the toxic realization that the permanence of racism had been a driving force in this school community. The line of questioning about Crystal's capacity as a school leader and the staff's concerns about their own attitudes about race demonstrated that the staff had been rooted in white tradition's coded language before her leadership. Although I had been trying to push back on staff and community behavior and beliefs, Crystal's mere presence illuminated my deficiencies as an accomplice against the permanence of white supremacy at Sycamore Elementary.

Similarly, Jocelyn's racial mobbing experience at Brookside Elementary directly resulted from the same racial permanence that came to the surface every single time she walked through the door of the school. Her daily appearance was enough to alert staff that they had upheld racist practices with the special education eligibility process, and their bigoted thoughts about her capacity to meet the needs of students bled out into a community already rooted in the traditions of white supremacy.

Tate's experience pushed against the racial permanence of the canon of literature at his high school. The English Department Lead was correct in her realization that her stomach would drop out of her body when considering what it would take to disrupt the permanence of racism in the curriculum. It should be noted that the English Department Lead made a slight pivot to remove *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from her syllabus as a small gesture of confronting the permanence of racism prevalent in the canon of literature at Tate's high school. With the pressure and influence of white supremacy at the macro and meso levels of education, this pivot

is an example of what Bell (1992) refers to as “small peaks of progress” in the battle against the permanence of racism at the micro level of education.

When reflecting on my own experience at Brookside Elementary, I recognized the markers of racial permanence that informed the development of racially insensitive IEPs, influenced the tendency to suspend Black and Hispanic/Latine students quickly, and underpinned the audacity of the community to maintain exclusive traditions rooted in whiteness rather than inclusion. One teacher’s statement that she would rather have the school culture Chad provided than the one I was trying to cultivate says so much. Rather than an anti-racist school culture, the fact that she would instead be willing put up with sexual harassment from a male leader suggesting what thong she should wear is significant. I lost my position as the principal of Brookside to the permanence of racism in that school community.

Through the lens of CRT, I know that racism is a normal and permanent part of American life (Matsuda et al., 1993). Bell’s (1980) racial realism concept states that racism is indestructible and will always be an imperative and permanent fixture of American society. The permanence of white supremacy is the connective tissue that influences all facets of society and is reinforced through the lack of interest convergence.

Interest Convergence

The interest convergence principle posits that Black people only make gains against racial oppression when their interests converge with those of White elites (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Interest convergence requires accomplices willing to conduct macro, meso, and micro transactions to dismantle white supremacy in education. “Given what we know about interest convergence, belief, care and perhaps even a possessive investment in an antiracist white identity, may be insufficient for compelling White suburban leaders to enact social justice” (Irby

et al., 2019, p. 206). In my leadership role, I was at first complicit at Sycamore Elementary. Then, I became compelled to act as an accomplice to disrupt the permanence of racism at Brookside Elementary. Although there were moments of minor success, my attempts to converge the needs, rights, and dignity of our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students and staff with the interests of White staff and community members were largely unsuccessful. The challenge of converging interests is that White people worry about how policy or system changes might threaten their status, position, or property, and they struggle with sharing benefits and privileges they have enjoyed exclusively that could transform the system to be advantageous for all people (Bell, 1980). Change is often purposefully or even subconsciously slow, at the will of White people who historically change policies or practices as they deem necessary to maintain their power or status quo (Milner et al., 2013). At Sycamore Elementary, specifically with Crystal, I maintained the status quo by abstaining from engaging in interest convergence on her behalf to save my leadership position.

Once at Brookside Elementary, my attitude about seeing myself as a racial being shifted. Although I had the drive to disrupt the systemic racism I witnessed in the school community, I certainly had not fully developed the wisdom to effect change through interest convergence. Suppose I had that level of capital at the micro level as the school principal in support of Jocelyn's voice. In that case, my leadership should have created an outcome where her colleagues would have honored the dignity of Jocelyn's truth. The staff would have been willing to stand up for their Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students with the same fierceness and loyalty they offered their White students. Borrowing from Bell's (1979) assertion that White people became threatened stemming from the belief of White people that Black people should never get ahead of White people, Jocelyn's teammates were threatened by her performance as an

educator and her natural ability to connect with and make positive gains with marginalized students. Rather than recognizing that both parties can be successful, they viewed this dynamic with Jocelyn as a zero-sum game.

Related to the experience Tate had with his high school's curriculum, the challenge of converging interests is that White people may worry about how policy or system changes might threaten their status or position, and they struggle with sharing benefits and privileges they have enjoyed exclusively that could transform the education system to be advantageous for all people (Bell, 1980). The school was willing to make a small change for Tate. However, the staff were not equipped with the interest or capital to consider making a system-wide change in curricula. Unless the stakeholders at my son's high school valued the infusion of diversity into the canon of literature or stood to benefit from a change in the canon of literature, the curricula would never change. Fueled by the permanence of racism, the community's resistance to interest convergence in this district was the roadblock. As a result, the meetings Malita wanted to have about possible offensive content in all K12 libraries suddenly disappeared from all our calendars. The district literacy committee was disbanded for this reason. Nevertheless, our district did an excellent job of communicating a lie that appeared to convey to our stakeholders that they valued interest convergence through the window dressing of the district's DEI work with parents. At the same time, my son was placed in the hallway to learn because of the lack of interest convergence to reimagine the canon of literature to offer a comprehensive, diversified, and dignified learning experience for all students.

The interest convergence principle hypothesizes that Black people only make gains against racial oppression when their interests converge with those of White elites (Bell, 1980; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). As a White female school leader, I held the marginalized perspective

that our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students and staff were experiencing racial trauma at Brookside Elementary. Shifting from a token protecting the district's brand to that of an accomplice focused on disrupting the racial oppression at Brookside Elementary, my interests no longer converged with the White elites who were overseers of the district. While interest convergence has the potential to foster systemic change, it can also give rise to the complexities of tokenism.

Tokenism

Tokenism can create the illusion of progress with DEI efforts while maintaining the status quo of white supremacy. In education, the micro level explores the definitions of race identities, what happens to small groups or individuals, and how they interpret their lived experiences in school or classroom settings (Byng, 2013). I would argue that, although she was more than qualified for the role, the district tokenized Crystal by placing her as a Black female in a leadership role to fulfill the illusion that the district was committed to diversifying leadership to reflect better the communities we served—only to remove her from that role a year later. Because of the permanence of racism and the lack of accomplices engaging in interest convergence, white supremacy prevailed at the micro level through tokenistic actions and beliefs under the guise of actual progress. The district continued to place employees in specific positions to feign the illusion of equitable practices. At the same time, individuals either participated in the role of accomplice to dismantle systems and structures of oppression or acted as tokens to uphold the lie that is the district's brand, just as I had done to Crystal. School leaders are vital in sustaining or disrupting practices that uphold racism (Toure & Dorsey, 2018). My interactions with Crystal represent how I acted as a token for the district and fostered further racism. Without an anchor in the framework of CWS, my lack of racial identity development fostered further

racism (Feagin, 2013). This experience gave me a better capacity for and commitment toward actively recognizing racial trauma. It required me to begin assessing whether I was contributing to recognized racial trauma or confronting it. I could no longer continue my role as a token protecting the district's brand. I had to be capable of shifting to the role of accomplice to disrupt the permanence of racism I was witnessing within the district.

Jocelyn's fight against racial mobbing illustrated the experiences our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine colleagues and students must endure to be seen as fully human in a system designed to exclude and dehumanize them. Because White principals substantially influence shaping educational opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latine students, I argue that they must reflect on how their white racial frame and white privilege impact their leadership if they intend to fight back against tokenistic expectations that are suffocating them from the racist macro and meso levels of education.

Rooted in Black intellectual traditions, CWS acknowledges that the relationship between white identity development and white supremacy allows White educators to begin to comprehend the complexities of their white racial identities, to awaken to their complicity in a system rooted in white supremacy, and to learn how to fight against systems of oppression (Jupp et al., 2016). Also rooted in Black scholarship, Feagin (2013) addressed white racial identity development in a way that acknowledges the complexities of the many intersectionalities within a white racial frame, such as gender, religion, and sexual orientation. School leaders must recognize the work that needs to be done to extract themselves from the role of token in a system undergirded by white supremacy. To effectively lead educators toward racial consciousness, school leaders must commit to their own emotional and intellectual work around race (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). White leaders must go through the process of acquiring the knowledge and

experience needed to engage in the process of redeveloping their white racial frame from a position of racial arrogance to one of vulnerability and racial humility (Feagin, 2013).

My son's English teacher, while contending with two intersections of oppression of his identity, both gender and race, exhibited behaviors that aligned with the role the system of white supremacy wanted him to play in the district, which was in direct conflict regarding how Tate had begun to see himself as unapologetically Black.

As a Hispanic/Latine community member, Malita had to contend with two intersections of oppression within her identity, gender, and race, to aspire to the tokenized role in which she found herself. By executing the demands of district leaders to remove me from my leadership position, she was only doing exactly what the system of white supremacy expected of her.

White HR directors like Monica and White assistant superintendents like Stephanie beautifully and predictably played the role of foot soldiers for white supremacy, continually going for the lie. These women possibly did not recognize their status as oppressed within the same system. Alternatively, if they did, they had become convinced by their false narrative about me or were too scared to speak up against the brand. Our district used the socially constructed concept of race to create whiteness and a racialized and gendered hierarchy and political system to define who was seen as fully human and who was not (Okun, 2021). White school leaders must be prepared for this dynamic and willing to push back. "Whiteness will counterpunch and try to knock you out because whiteness is consumed by its own self-interest" (Genao & Mercedes, 2021, p. 135). Whiteness is consumed with its own lie.

Recommendations for Further Research

Jones et al. (2016) explained, "In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life. It is a way of life that acknowledges contingency, finitude,

embeddedness in storied being, encounters with Otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep conversation going” (p. 53). Genuine progress toward dismantling white supremacy requires confronting the status quo and dismantling and addressing the underlying power dynamics perpetuating systemic racism. Areas of research to consider furthering the goal of disruption include intersectionality, power dynamics, and narrative forms of qualitative research.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was critical of the notion of identity as a single-axis framework practiced in legal doctrine and antiracist and feminist politics. Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality research was initially used to demonstrate the multidimensional interactions between race and gender that shaped the employment experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) sought to disrupt the inclination to see gender and race as separate categories. CRT scholars broadened the term and framed intersectionality as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58). Individual members of society represent multiple identities and perform those identities in a variety of ways, never knowing for sure to which of these identities others react (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Intersectionality scholarship can be a tool used to disrupt the tendency to treat oppressed people as monolithic groups, requiring researchers to recognize that all forms of subordination are interlocked and mutually reinforcing (Matsuda, 1991a). Failing to use intersectionality theory when conducting research centers the privileged class over groups of oppressed people experiencing intersecting subordination (Hutchinson, 2001). The purpose of using intersectionality theory is to explore the intersections between forms of oppression rather than

intersecting oppression with privilege (Hutchinson, 2001). The possibilities for research rooted in intersectionality frameworks are robust, considering the multiple identities each person carries within them that define their full humanity. For example, while in conversation with colleagues, one educator listened to the premise of my study and felt she might be able to conduct a similar study that included her intersectionalities as a Black, female, cisgender school leader. However, our discussion turned to considering how she might use Black Feminism and CRT to frame her study. Future researchers need to think unapologetically about their identities and the intersections that make them who they are. They need to be honest about which theoretical frameworks will offer them the most growth as they look through the mirror of critical realism.

Power Dynamics

Critical autoethnographies can continue to examine power dynamics in various contexts. One area that could have extended my research would have been to include feminist theory when exploring the power dynamics of my own story. In my experience, sexism was not limited to males holding stereotypes against women or discriminating against women. Although the district is primarily run by males, Malita, Stephanie, and Monica were the choreographers of my demotion. I argue that women can sometimes be more offensive and oppressive toward their female peers than males. Feminism and other critical theory combinations intertwined with CRT or CWS could generate robust research findings to explore these power dynamics further.

Considering how much evidence exists regarding racism at the macro and meso levels of educational policy and practice, less research exists at the micro level of everyday encounters of racism in the educational system (Kohli et al., 2017). Holt (1995) and Kohli et al. (2017) argued that attention must be paid to how micro-level racist events connect to macrostructures of racial injustice because this normalization of everyday incidents of racism obstructs our ability to

dismantle systemic racism. Swanson and Welton (2019) stated, “Existing research...does not fully capture the political challenges and possible stakeholder pushback that White principals may be up against when confronting whiteness in their school communities” (p. 734).

Researchers willing to critically research themselves could contribute to the micro level understanding of white supremacy in education or other fields.

Narrative Forms

Qualitative methodologies are used when little is known about the research problem and further inquiry is needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is “utilized to discover meanings and interpretations by studying cases intensively in natural settings” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 650). In the field of academic research, one way to convey data in a meaningful way is through narrative form. The field of education is a mirror of society, including patterns of marginalization and privilege (Marx et al., 2017). Showing an insider’s glance of looking into that mirror can be powerful. Personal stories about being a part of and living through patterns of privilege and marginalization expose readers to how we are affected by or contribute to institutionalized power and privilege (Marx et al., 2017). In academia, western epistemology tends to give space to reason over emotion, but the split between reason and emotion is not absolute (Jagger, 1989). Mitchell and Clark (2021) suggested that “the storyteller is the architect and engineer who takes the raw material of experience and builds a structure to contain it that puts the parts in their right places” (p. 93). Research can be done through many creative and multimedia approaches. Limitations such as the researcher’s inability to be vulnerable (Adams et al., 2017) or drawing limited conclusions (Méndez, 2014) can be mitigated if more voices are willing to contribute to narrative forms to broaden this wedge of qualitative research.

Conclusion

This critical autoethnographic study created a wedge for school leaders and leadership scholars to advance our understanding of White female school leaders, specifically concerning white supremacy, the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and tokenism through the lens of CRT and CWS. This testimony may not contribute to policy change, but it may open the eyes and ears of just one person who needs to terminate the harm they are causing. Maybe these words can empower another school leader to use their voice in a way that disrupts white supremacy and elicits systemic change. To those who would attempt such disruption, I would say no one will do this work for you. There are no shortcuts to dismantling and rebuilding your racial frame. It is a lifelong commitment to change. This critical autoethnographic study shed more light through an authentic representation of the internal struggle I experienced as a White female principal trying to practice antiracist leadership. To the next educational leader willing to look at herself and her practices, the best advice I can give you comes from song lyrics written by The Avett Brothers (2019): “Tell the truth to yourself; the rest will fall in place.”

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 05/09/2023

Principal Investigator: Christie Toliver

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 05/09/2023

Protocol Number: [2304049088](#)

Protocol Title: JUST GO FOR THE LIE: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A WHITE FEMALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(701) for research involving

Category 1 (2018): RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at chris.saxton@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,
Nicole Morse
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

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