Exploring the Relationships Between White Teachers and Black Students: A Qualitative Study on the Impact That Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Positive Relationships Can Have On Student Success

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EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WHITE TEACHERS AND BLACK STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT THAT CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS CAN HAVE ON STUDENT SUCCESS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who stood by me throughout this entire process. First and foremost, thank you to my parents, Robert and Jean Johnson, for always believing in me, loving me, and supporting me through every step of my life. You are my biggest cheerleaders and I will never forget how much you have helped me. Thank you for making me into the woman I am today. I am eternally grateful. Thank you to my brother, Erik, for always keeping me humble. Hopefully, you will never have to hear mom and dad talk about me getting a doctorate again! Thank you to my husband, Justin, for dealing with my stress and always being willing to take the kids out of the house so I could research and write. I know it hasn’t been easy on you. You have always been supportive and you have contributed to my success. Hopefully, we can both breathe now. Thank you to my boys, Hudson and Hayden, for being with me throughout this whole journey. I started this program while I was pregnant for the first time and you had to endure countless online lectures in utero and countless hours without my full attention and participation. I never had the opportunity to have a free and clear mind throughout your lives, but I’m finally at the point where I can fully focus on the both of you! You may not ever understand, but I did this for you!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the students who have helped me obtain the data for this study, specifically, J.S, P.J, Q.H, and W.F. Thank you for being honest and allowing me into your lives. Your trust in me means the world and I hope I can
make you proud. You are incredible young men and I am honored to have been a part of your lives. Thank you!
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ABSTRACT

This action research study began as a way to investigate the impact of the relationships that White teachers have on their Black students and what strategies can be implemented to promote success in the absence of a positive relationship. Historical information provides the reader with the basic understanding of why academic deficiencies exist and continue to exist in the Black community and what strategies inside and outside of school can remedy the achievement gap. This qualitative study provides information directly from the students who experienced the inequities as told through interviews and an anonymous survey. The lack of diversity among teachers and the absence of authentic relationships has oftentimes created an environment that is not conducive or comfortable for Black students. This information is viewed through a critical race lens and the literature that promotes relationships and improving racial disparities is highlighted. Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, and Noddings’ Pedagogy of Caring provide the framework for analyzing the racial inequities and the possible solutions to the educational imbalances. The findings of this study support the racial disparities that have been occurring in the educational system, yet they offer the hope that success is more than attainable through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy and with the proper supports in place.
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"Every child deserves a champion – an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be." – Rita Pierson

Humans are profoundly shaped by their experiences and social environments, so much so that when any one of those relationships becomes strained or damaged, distress may occur, specifically during childhood and adolescence (Graham, 2009). Detrimental experiences and social situations may lead to long-term health and educational problems (Cook, 2013). One of the critical relationships that significantly impacts adolescents is the teacher student relationships or TSR. George Washington Carver, an inventor, college professor, and the most prominent Black scientist of the early 20th century, once said that all learning is understanding relationships (ACS, 2005; Pierson, 2013). The focus of this study is the significance of meaningful and authentic relationships between White teachers and their Black high school students and why those relationships are critical for Black students' academic success and emotional well-being.

Positive and caring TSRs can unleash untapped student potential and create an inclusive and welcoming educational environment (Brown, 2010). These relationships
are vital in giving students motivation and a sense that they are cared for (Leadbeater, 2008). Relationships have the potential to create a positive, lasting impact that affects a student academically, emotionally, and socially for the rest of their life. Alternatively, if a student experiences negative interaction, the effects can be equally harmful to a student's development and mindset (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Ort, 2011). During my eight years as a high school counselor, I have witnessed the academic, social, and emotional effects of both positive and negative TSRs within the classroom and school environment, most notably with my Black student population. I have also observed the importance of outside factors such as a strong and supportive family member or the involvement in extracurricular activities when there is an absence of supportive TSRs throughout the student’s educational journey. After an abundance of conversations with the aforementioned students over the years, a common complaint is the feeling of being targeted. Other complaints would also arise, such as the feeling of being misunderstood, being disrespected, and the realization that there was a lack of a cultural representation as a whole within the school building. Frequently, the students who felt targeted and disrespected received multiple discipline referrals for behaviors that other students demonstrated without punishment. Strained TSRs inside and outside of the classroom environment can lead to an overabundance of negative results, including an uptick in disciplinary actions, an increase in the retention rate, an increased dropout rate, a reduction in the on-time graduation rate, apathy, emotional stress, the feeling of not belonging and being alone, and an overall reduction in academic success and satisfaction. The adverse results that emerge from negative or absent TSRs and classroom experiences, general displeasure in the educational system, and the seemingly fortuitous
success stories inspired my desire to identify what experiences are lacking within the school and what systems need to be in place to successfully employ culturally relevant classroom and school. I also felt the need to explore how those systems can improve the academic success of our most vulnerable students and what similarities students experience outside of school that become their motivators for success if they are not receiving the necessary supports in school. As an educator, I desired to identify what I can improve upon to ensure that our underserved population of Black students receive the best possible chance at academic, social, and emotional success. Along the way, I was also inspired to identify the individual characteristics and outside supports in the personal lives of Black students who seemingly beat the odds to find the commonalities between them. The possibilities of using that information to understand how to provide extra assistance for the students who do not experience such support from other sources may be beneficial to the long-term success of the students.

The effects of misaligned teacher and student backgrounds is apparent locally and nationally and the effects can be seen in all areas of education. In 1972, 22% of public-school students were students of color, in 2007, students of color increased to 43%, and in 2019, students of color increased to 53.5%. According to Carter & Darling-Hammond (2020), “The projection is that by the year 2027, White students will only contribute to 44.7% of the public elementary and secondary school enrollment, making students of color the majority of the population” (Gitomer & Bell, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Simultaneously, the difference of the composition of teachers from that of their students is glaring. In the 2017-2018 school year, 79% of teachers were White (The Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). As a result of this unbalanced
composition, the reality of a disconnect between a significant number of teachers and their students is occurring. The data reveals the effects of this incongruity through realities such as the inflation of Black student dropouts, grade level retentions, severity and frequency of disciplinary actions, and the overall educational deficit of Black students. National data confirms that 51.8% or 1,701,620 White students graduated from high school compared to 14.2% or 467,340 Black students during the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In South Carolina, the region referenced in this study, there was a 76.4% graduation rate for Black students and more specifically in Coastal High School’s [pseudonym] district, while still behind their White counterparts, Black students had a 78.6% graduation rate. On average, across the United States, Black students scored about four grade levels below White students in both math and reading (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). On the 2018-2019 Nations Report Card for CHS’s district, 57% of Black students were below the basic level in math and 49% were below basic in reading in eighth grade compared to 23% below basic in math and 20% below basic in reading for White students. The most recent national discipline data from the National Center for Educational Statistics stated that in the 2013-2014 school, Black students were given out-of-school suspensions or expulsions at a rate of 13.7% compared to White students at the rate of 3.4% (2017). The disproportionate disciplinary action taken against Black students leads to lost instructional time, which coincides with increased grade level retention and reduced on-time graduation rates. The most recent reports of this data originating from the Office of Civil Rights in 2015 state that in the county of the research location, Black students missed 13,506 days of instructional time compared to 2,140 days that the White students missed (Office of Civil Rights Data
Collection, 2015). Nationally, during the 2017-2018 school year, the Black student population missed a total of 213,933 days of school, students identified as two or more races missed 14,016 days, and White students missed 95,484 days. (Office of Civil Rights Data Collection, 2018)

The aforementioned educational inequalities are just a fraction of the negative statistics that can be found in literature resulting from a long and arduous struggle that the Black community has endured in the United States. According to Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2020, as cited in Gitomer & Bell, 2016), "The presumption of racial inferiority has not disappeared from the American intellectual landscape, much less from the tacit beliefs of many who influence education from the statehouse to the schoolhouse" (p. 597). Beginning with the criminality of the very act of pursuing an education during slavery, to the period of forced school segregation, to the post-Brown vs. Board of Education era that legally allowed integration yet created hyper-segregated schools (Orfield and Frankenburg, 2008), the quest for education and equality has been far from tranquil. While schools were legally considered desegregated, hyper-segregation continued to occur for a multitude of reasons including the creation of “unitary status” school districts, the policy of “redlining,” and “White flight.” Unitary status school districts emerged after a series of court cases in the 1990s including the 1991 Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell case, which concluded that the district had “completely eradicated its system of dual or segregated schools, and, in the eyes of the court, is operating an integrated, unitary system” (Orfield, Frankenburg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014, p. 27). Once the district received this designation, it was “not subject to legal oversight to remedy segregation that remains or subsequently develops” (Orfield et al.,
Redlining contributed to hyper-segregation because of the 1930s Federal Housing Administration (FHA) maps that classified neighborhoods as high-to-low risk, which were used by realtors, urban planners, and bankers. “The most insidious legacy” of redlining, according to one historian, “is how good neighborhoods get coded as white and bad neighborhoods get coded as black” (Laughlin 2019, para. 10). Finally, when the zoning laws created by White people failed to restrict the homeownership of Black people in urban areas, the White population decided to move to the suburbs to escape true integration. (Mulder, 2015) It would be an impossibility for society to neglect the realities that occurred due to over a hundred years of systemic racism. Curriculum marginalization for minorities is evident in all subjects, and the Black population’s contributions and worldviews remain largely omitted from American history and science curriculum. (Tyler, Hancock, & Richardson, 2020).

The underrepresentation of the culture and accomplishments of minority populations in the curriculum and the overrepresentation and normalization of White culture and achievements has led to many educators learning to view marginalized populations through a deficit lens (Gorski, 2011). The data in this study will be viewed and analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its five major tenets. The following five tenets outlined by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Delgado and Stefancic (2001) will guide this research:
1. The belief that racism is normal, not aberrant, in US society
2. Interest convergence or material determinism
3. Race as a social construction
4. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism
5. Voice or counter-narrative

The significance of Critical Race Theory (CRT) lies within its ability to analyze the disproportions between dominant and marginalized racial groups and to challenge the prejudicial policies of the groups that support a system of White privilege. "CRT challenges the dominant power structure, is committed to social justice, values experiential knowledge, and uses interdisciplinary practices to put knowledge into critical historical context" (Lynn, 2004; Solózano, 1997). The primary participants in this study will have the opportunity to use their voices to convey their experiences through the act of counter-storytelling, a method of providing a platform for people whose experiences are often neglected. Counter-storytelling is a tool for “exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yasso, p. 32). Their stories will provide data that may challenge the status quo of the traditional views of education while validating the truths within the five CRT tenets. Additional data collected through an anonymous targeted survey will also be included to provide supplementary information from Black students in the same graduation cohort as the interview participants.

**Problem of Practice**

The disproportionate levels of negative educational experiences that Black students frequently encounter due to the lack of a teacher's cultural understanding or
ability to meaningfully connect and provide a culturally relevant curriculum affects their academic success, confidence, and overall well-being in the school environment. A culturally relevant curriculum incorporates mandated performance assessments and community- and student-driven learning while focusing on three domains: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These cultural barriers and the disconnect between teachers and students frequently lead to disengagement, the feeling of not belonging and not being treated equitably in addition to more serious issues such as disproportionate discipline, an increase in the dropout rate, an increase in the grade-level retention rate, a lower on-time graduation rate, and an overall increase in negative behaviors. If meaningful relationships are not established in the school building, it is hypothesized that students need to have a strong support system in their personal lives to counteract some of the negative effects that would deter a successful outcome. One of those support systems is a strong familial relationship which includes strong emotional support, frequent meaningful dialogue, and clear and consistent behavioral limits (Yen, 2009). These strong familial relationships have the ability to overpower the negative experiences in school that can derail success. Other outside support systems include churches and extracurricular activities.

**Research Question**

This research study began to explore the possibility that teachers who employ a culturally relevant pedagogy and have a positive and supportive classroom environment while simultaneously building meaningful relationships, can reduce the number of adverse outcomes for Black students. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as pedagogy of opposition that embodies three criteria: “Students must
experience academic success, students must develop and/or maintain cultural
cOMPetence, and students must develop a CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS through which they
challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160)

The conversations I have had with Black students and the experiences I have gone
through personally at CHS provided the foundation and guidance I needed when
formulating my research questions:

1. How do recent Black graduates describe the impact of their relationships with
   White teachers and how did those relationships impact the student academically,
   socially, and emotionally?

2. Do recent Black high school graduates at a southeastern suburban high school
   perceive a correlation between positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) and a
   school culture that utilizes a culturally relevant pedagogy within its classrooms on
   Black students’ success?

3. What strategies employed by White educators have a perceived effect on the
   culturally diverse student population at the southeastern urban high school in this
   study?

4. Who or what do successful Black students attribute their successes to when there
   is an absence of meaningful educational relationships within the school setting?

Purpose Statement

This action research study aims to gain a general understanding of Black students'
perceptions on the current educational system as well as their personal experiences and to
explore the benefits of teachers utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms.
Supported by the tenets of Critical Race Theory and utilizing a qualitative research
approach, I, as the researcher, will gain the knowledge of first-hand experiences of four Black students through semi-structured interviews as well as a targeted survey of Black graduates of CHS.

My hypothesis entering into this action research study was that all students, but particularly Black students, will become more actively engaged with the content if they have positive relationships with their teachers and they are provided a culturally-relevant and equitable learning environment. Educators who exhibit culturally relevant pedagogic characteristics have an increased ability to deter negative behaviors as they cultivate a culture of respect, empathy, and community within their classrooms. This hypothesis is based on years of personal conversations with my Black students, academic data including grades, discipline and test scores, and countless peer-reviewed literature to strengthen my personal findings. As Stronge (2002) points out, "In addition to the demonstration of genuine caring, effective teachers establish rapport, credibility, and trust with students by emphasizing, modeling, and practicing fairness and respect" (p. 218).

Culturally relevant classrooms can generate an overall improvement in a school's culture, which includes a reduction in negative behaviors. Culturally relevant teaching allows the teacher to incorporate the student’s learned experiences; experiences that may not be reflected in textbooks. Starting from where the students are and respecting their local and familial knowledge is not rejecting the national educational standards, but enhancing them (Freire, 1994). Carter & Darling-Hammond (2020) emphasized that teaching is not culturally neutral, but rather a political and contextually specific, and it can engage or disaffect marginalized groups of people who do not hold much economic, political, or social power (Gitomer & Bell, 2016).
I recall my first year as a school counselor at Coastal Middle School (CMS), one of the two main feeder schools for CHS and the only Title 1 school. I was a new graduate of The Citadel with a near perfect 4.0 GPA, but I immediately concluded that I knew absolutely nothing once I walked through the doors on my first day. Although I felt properly educated about the basics of the profession, I accepted a job without any knowledge of the students who populated the school. I quickly realized that working with Black students from my home state of New York did not mean that I understood the unique and special nuances of Black students in South Carolina, especially in the rich cultural landscape of the Lowcountry, the southern-most counties in the state, bordered on the east by the Atlantic Ocean. I did not understand many the students’ conversations and frequently needed to ask them to repeat themselves because I did not know the “slang,” or what I ignorantly thought was slang. My complete lack of awareness of their Gullah/Geechee culture was a devastating handicap that was only lessened by the two positive characteristics that I had during that time: my attempts to be kind and my willingness to learn. Over the course of a year, the students eventually presumed that they could trust me because my behavior and mindset was consistent. Looking back, I do not blame the students for being wary of someone new, especially marginalized and partially-segregated students in a Title 1 school such as CMS. Typically, there is a large teacher turnover in these schools, and when teachers come and go very quickly, it is difficult to form meaningful and trusting relationships. According to Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2019), there is a 50 percent or higher teacher turnover rate in Title 1 schools. Students quickly learn what teachers are there because they care and what teachers are there because they are using the school as a stepping stone. The
students at CMS might not have realized that they were in a school lacking equal resources, staff, and extracurricular activities as the other middle schools, but they would most definitely know if they had caring teachers whom they could trust. Fortunately, the majority of the students who I had at CMS made it through to CHS and graduated. Many of the students loved to joke around with me about my lack of knowledge during that first year. To me, it was a blur, but I was amazed by what they remembered many years later. I would like to hope that it was due to forming a meaningful and trusting relationship with them.

**Significance of this Study**

"Research on effective teachers of Black students emphasizes, among other things, the teachers' collective belief that Black students' potential will not be realized in classrooms where teachers view Black students from a deficit perspective" (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott & Garrison-Wade, 2008). Viewing Black students through a deficit lens continues to perpetuate White superiority in the educational system and is damaging to our marginalized student populations. “When a habit of looking for intrinsic deficit intertwines with a habit of interpreting cultural and racial difference as a deficit, the deck is powerfully loaded against poor students of color” (Harry & Klingner, 2007, para. 22).

While many studies already exist on the significance of the achievement gap between White and Black students which has plagued the educational system in our country, I found the topic to be of continued importance because these disparities (lower standardized test scores, increased drop-out rates, lower on-time graduation rates, and higher levels of disciplinary action taken) continue to occur. The same concerns from
decades ago are still present concerns. Additionally, I was eager to incorporate the experiences of students who fell into some or all of the “at-risk” categories which have proven to be a recipe for educational disaster, and I wanted to find out how they prevailed, overcame those hurdles, and achieved success. The common term educators use is the achievement gap; however, a more appropriate term "educational debt" is used by Dr. Ladson-Billings, a former Distinguished Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, a pedagogical theorist, and a teacher researcher. Ladson-Billings (2006) contends that the term achievement gap allows for misunderstanding that individual students or families are responsible for their circumstances and that they need to catch up to their White counterparts instead of recognizing the structural barriers that have prevented equality. The widely-used achievement gap terminology essentially constructs a variety of class systems that are deeply embedded in teacher-education programs. It is due to this term first coined in 1963 to describe a two-year educational gap between minority and White students (Walker, 1963) that virtually all current and former educators who have graduated from teacher preparation programs which have allowed marginalized populations to be viewed through a deficit perspective lens. (Delpit, 2006; Milner, Tenore & Laughter, 2008) Educators are continuously reviewing data and attending professional development sessions that are centered around the deficits of Black and other marginalized students instead of celebrating their differences and learning how to incorporate those cultural differences in positive ways within the curriculum. This can be executed by utilizing the students’ funds of knowledge and engaging them in the curriculum by using content they are already familiar with in their personal lives. (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).
Effectively employing this approach requires teachers to invest in relationships with their students. The past research legacy on the deficits of Black students (Hilliard, 1979; Kamin, 1974; Madaus, 1994) coined as the "inferiority paradigm," was built on the belief that people of color are biologically and genetically inferior to Whites (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 1982; Selden, 1994). Many of the same assessments used to generate ability levels of minorities, such as IQ tests, are still used today (Tate, 1997), and the same thought processes continue to this day because race and racism and its centrality in the American society is viewed as normal as the first tenet of Critical Race Theory suggests. While data and previous studies can assist in understanding the barriers of marginalized students, the most effective data in this study will be collected from the students who actually lived through the experiences themselves.

The participants in this research study will provide the reader with data and personal experiences from their perspectives as students at CHS. It is the researcher’s perception that the participants of this study have been victims of the biased American educational system, which is based upon dominant cultural norms, and they all have compelling stories to discuss concerning the knowledge of covert and overt racism and biases that surrounded them throughout their formative years in school. Some of the participants involved in this study have another layer of culture to navigate because they are either the descendants of Gullah/Geechee individuals, a unique enclave of former enslaved people with distinctive creole language, or they have adopted some of the customs and language patterns simply by living in the Lowcountry area. The participant responses in the surveys and individual interviews reveal their awareness of their experiences unique to the Southeastern region of the United States, which continues to
endure pervasive racial tensions. For example, most of the participants reveal their own sense of awareness of the Southern origins of the slave trade that permeates the lives of the local Black families who have originated and remained in the South Carolina Lowcountry, the geographical area between Interstate 95 and the Atlantic coast. Although Black students from every area of the country have experiences with the inequalities in their local educational system, there are unique stories that the students from the Lowcountry of South Carolina offer due to constant reminders of slavery surrounding them on a daily basis by means of street names, remnants and replications of plantations, and the once-revered slave owner statues that saturate the landscape. While the participants may not all be of direct Gullah/Geechee descent as far as they know, this unique culture saturates the entire Lowcountry region and the researcher has found it difficult to find many Black students who were born and raised in the area who doesn’t relate to or embody the culture. I believe that the stories of these young high school graduates who were recently my students can inspire educators and improve the deficit-view mindset that has permeated their education.
CHAPTER 2
THE DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of previous studies and information related to the educational inequities and biases that Black students have faced throughout the history of the United States and which presently still affect them. It will also identify the consequences from those inequities as well as explore potential strategies that have the ability to improve upon the current curriculum and the relationships between teachers and their students to empower and academically and emotionally support Black and other marginalized students.

The historical information conveys the severity of the lifelong struggle that Black students have suffered and continue to navigate through during their lives, specifically in the years of formal education. Historical information also provides an insight into the unique enclave of Black Gullah/Geechee students who are uniquely present in the area where this research study is taking place. The studies and literature found in this literature review will allow the reader to understand the history behind issues that plague Black American students as stated in the problem of practice such as disproportionate disciplinary action, an increase in the dropout rate, and increase of grade-level retention, and a lower on-time graduation rate. The literature will also provide evidence that
positive relationships with teachers who utilize a culturally relevant pedagogy and provide an equitable learning environment can improve their Black students' academic and emotional success. The value of acquiring information from past studies on these critical issues allows future researchers to utilize methodologies that have worked in the past and analyze and improve upon areas that may not have resulted in success.

**Overview of Literature**

Extensive research on racial inequalities in the classroom, the generational deficits of Black students, and numerous methods that attempt to improve the achievement gap between White and Black students are easily found by conducting a minimal inquiry.

The literature presented in this chapter provides an understanding of the student population involved in this action research study and the negative implications that will continue to transpire if culturally relevant education and intentional social-emotional learning techniques do not reach the forefront of educational policies and importance. The literature will also illustrate the significance of the theoretical framework that supports this study inclusive of Social Development Theory, Bioecological Systems Theory, and the Pedagogy of Caring as well as the impactful culturally-relevant methods viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

**Historical Background**

The history of education in the United States has endured severe inequalities between White and Black students and there are still many inequalities and tensions that remain to this day. The disparities revolving around the lack of resources and the lack of
opportunities began in the late 1800s. Over time, the second-class-citizen treatment and the segregation of Black Americans led to the quandary of minority-heavy schools in areas of increased poverty, which were categorized as failing. Biases and inequities are present to this very day and in many aspects, little has changed in over 100 years, resulting in segregated areas and improperly-balanced schools. (Orfield and Frankenberg, 2008)

The attempts for Black Americans to desegregate the schools and obtain an equal education for their children led to legal action, which resulted in several of the most famous court cases in American history.

**Noteworthy Court Cases**

*Brown v. Board of Education*

In the antebellum South, society prohibited slaves from learning how to read and write. It took until May 17, 1954, when the Brown v. Board of Education court case ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Despite the unconstitutional ruling, segregation was still occurring and nine years later, 99% of Blacks in the South were in segregated schools (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). More specifically, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, it took an additional year to acknowledge the Brown v. Board of Education ruling and that wasn’t until an additional “Brown” case emerged: *Millicent Brown et al. v. The Charleston County School Board, District 20*. This court case represented Black parents and the requests for their children to attend White schools.

*Briggs v. Elliott*

Preceding the Brown v. Board of Education course case, there was the less famous Briggs v. Elliott court case in 1947. This case tackled segregated schools with
poor leadership, poor school facilities, and an absence of transportation. The Briggs v. Board of Education combined with four additional similar cases and resulted in what is now known as Brown v. Board of Education. There was no other place that "felt the pressure to desegregate schools more acutely than the Southeast" (Houck & Ross, 2010, p. 2). Segregation was ultimately a problem of power – not psychology or morality – and a system designed to institutionalize the isolation and the political, economic, and social subordination of African Americans (Danns & Purdy, 2015, p. 578). These court cases attempted to shape the future of equality in education.

Despite the court ruling six decades ago, many of South Carolina's schools remain primarily segregated and unequal. Constant discussions of inequality and “great scholarship and work do not seem to push the platform and get rid of the problem” (Brown, 2021). Black families are often forced into areas with underperforming schools, and those schools lack equal access to resources, lack of quality tenured teachers, and lack of opportunities. More than half of the minority students in the United States is in racially concentrated districts, where over 75% are White or nonwhite (Meatto, 2019). This glaring separation is referred to as "hyper-segregation" by Orfield and Frankenberg (2008). Things are not looking better. Black children are now more likely to grow up in poor neighborhoods than 50 years ago (Chang, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). To this day, systemic segregation's effects continue to have long-term effects on our students and schools. This form of segregation can be seen in the location of this research study as well. Nearly all participants possess a story detailing the struggle to attend a diverse high school during the day and return to segregated, low-income neighborhoods after school. While the research site high school itself is far from segregated, the reality of returning to
segregated neighborhoods after school remains. The participants of this study all dealt with the reality of having to work harder and utilize more of the resources that were offered at school to have the same chance of success as the majority of their White peers.

**South Carolina’s Education System**

While race and education are a concern throughout the country, the importance of race in the Southeast is of significant importance because the students in this study have successfully completed their education in the area. Additionally, the Southeast is an area that consistently experiences the highest level of need in the United States. Educators and policymakers in the South face challenges of resource adequacy, low levels of academic achievement relative to the rest of the nation, and persistent racial and economic achievement gaps (Houck & Ross, 2010). According to the most recently published data by the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2016-2017 school year, of the more than 7.7 million Black students enrolled in public K-12 schools, 4.3 million or 56 percent, live in the South. More specifically, South Carolina's public-school system, in which Coastal High School is a part of, is among the worst in the nation (Johnson, 2014).

“Saddled with a legacy of apathy and low expectations that threatens the state's newfound prosperity. South Carolina's schools trail other states by nearly every measure, leaving students unprepared for the world that awaits them” (Bowers et al., 2018). The measures above include the failure to meet state benchmarks in English and math in grades three through eight, graduating college and career ready as suggested by the state department, on-time graduation rate, and trailing behind forty-eight states on the ACT college preparedness test. The significance of this data is the driving force behind this study, specifically for marginalized populations because if the majority of Black K-12 students
are located in the South and the Southern schools are viewed as some of the worst schools in the nation, then steps need to be taken to improve the educational system. Implementing systems that bring the tenets of Critical Race Theory to the forefront of education and providing teacher education on how to overcome those biases have the potential to improve our Southern schools.

The Black student population at CHS is far from a small; in fact, according the data located on the South Carolina Department of Education website and CHS’s district website, CHS is the most diverse high school in the district. During the 2019-2020 school year, CHS was composed of 45% White students, 43% Black students, and 5% “other” which includes students who identify as Black. The racial composition of the school might lead to the assumption that culturally-relevant opportunities occur frequently, however, after examining the curriculum in CHS’s district, a clear void is present within all schools in the district including CHS. The lack of relevant and meaningful cultural educational experiences is evident. At one point in time, CHS offered an African American studies class as an elective, yet the school ceased offering the class after the 2013-2014 school year. Additionally, not one of the thirteen other public high schools in the district offer an African American studies class. The district did provide Black students limited opportunities to learn about their history and culture during Black History Month. The hypothesis regarding the necessity for more inclusive schools steered my research for advocates of a culturally-relevant educational system, and led me to Gloria Ladson-Billings, an influential researcher and educator who advocates for culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is a "conceptual framework that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural
backgrounds, interests, and lived experiences in all aspects of teaching and learning within the classroom and across the school" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009; Milner, 2017). This type of pedagogy has not been formally introduced or implemented at CHS or any other local schools.

Regarding the shift in education over the years, the focus has been meeting goals and standards, completing an overwhelming amount of paperwork, incorporating technology, and teaching to the test, just to name a few responsibilities (Mulvahill, 2019). When teachers are forced to follow a strict curriculum that does not permit time for individual creativity, they must teach precisely what they are told. This results in little-to-no room for incorporating a culturally relevant methodology or educating a majority population about their unique heritage if district and school leadership do not support the mindset.

**The Long-Term Effects of Educational Inequities**

Based on the history and knowledge of the present state of educational inequality, it is imperative to acknowledge the long-term effects for students who have been exposed to the inequities, specifically in the South Carolina schools where the participants in this study attended. Black students in this country are not receiving an equitable education and often, they are not provided with the same quality of facilities and resources in schools due to the higher concentration of minority populations despite the termination of legal school segregation. While there are many factors that contribute to the achievement gap including home and neighborhood environments and school factors unrelated to teachers' performance, one dynamic is becoming impossible to ignore: Black students are still treated differently by teachers and school administrators (Weir, 2016) and the
governing bodies of our country. It is no surprise that they are viewed differently. Dr. James D. Anderson, a professor of the history of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the author of *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935* stressed the importance of unlearning the narrative that Blacks in the South need saving (2020). An abundance of literature is centered around the deficits and underachievement of African Americans. It is rare to find any literature regarding academic excellence (Ladson-Bilings, 2004). In a 2014 article written by Gloria Ladson-Billings, she states, “The extant literature was filled with studies about African American students, but most cast them as deficient and closely associated with terms such as at-risk, disadvantaged, and underachieving” (p. 76). Not only is the literature riddled with a deficit-perspective viewpoint of marginalized students for the educators to view, the literature and curriculum that the student are taught, fail to emphasize accomplishments and stories by people who look like them. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, the authors of the updated 2020 book, *Critical Race Theory*, share similar concerns with Ladson-Billings. They also validate curriculum concerns by emphasizing the fact that everyday educational materials such as history, textbooks, movies, curriculum, and media have all been centered around the experiences and lives of the dominant culture (Degaldo & Stefancic, 2020). The curriculum is so normal to educators that it becomes an unconscious and permanent component to education as the tenets of CRT state. Due to the continuous lack of representation in the curriculum, the deficit perspective that has been engrained in educators, has the ability to lead to severe consequences for marginalized students. The following are a few examples of how the current system is failing our Black and other marginalized student populations.
Disproportionate Discipline

Data confirms the inequalities of disciplinary action given to African American and White students. The following United States statistics for the 2015-2016 school year from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) are distressing:

1. One African American student is suspended every seven seconds of the school day.

2. The likelihood that black students will be suspended for an offense is three times as much compared to their non-black peers.

3. 68% of African American high school students say they frequently face discrimination at school.

The statistics for South Carolina, the state that the participants of this study reside in, area equally as bad. According to the Digest of Education Statistics found on the National Center for Educational Statistics website, during the 2013-2014 school year in the state of South Carolina, 6.17% or 23,713 White students received out-of-school suspensions compared to 17.88% or 46,386 Black students. Also, 23% or 883 White students were expelled compared to .68% or 1,775 African American students. There is consistent evidence that Black students' behaviors are perceived as more problematic and are punished more severely than White students (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). In a recent study by Pearman, Curran, Fisher and Gardella (2019) involving achievement rates and discipline published in 2019, the data showed that the racial achievement gap increased simultaneously with the discipline gap, which suggests that the "mechanisms connecting the achievement gap to the discipline gap, such a teacher biases and feeling isolated at school, may be the most salient for black students" (p. 14). The local discipline data
provided by the Civil Rights Data Collection found at https://ocrdata.ed.gov/ correlates with the overall state and country-wide discipline data. The most recent publicly documented discipline data in 2015 shows that in the participant’s school district (CHS), the total number of K-12 school days missed due to out-of-school suspensions was 17,349. Out of that number, 14,833 of those days of missed instructional time were missed by Black students and 14,478 were missed with the classification of “mixed.” This data provides evidence of racial inequalities that disrupt the students' lives during the school day and provide roadblocks to an equal education that would benefit the students in the long run. Discipline is the premier site for the production of racial inequalities and the concept of the "school-to-prison-pipeline" (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; Losen 2014; Noguera 2014). These disciplinary inequalities also lead to an increasing percentage of students who are unsuccessful in completing high school.

Lower Graduation Rates/Higher Dropout Rates/Higher Grade-Level Retention Rate

Increased levels of disciplinary action and lower levels of academic success for also tend to lead to lower graduation rates and increase the dropout percentage rates for Black students. Data retrieved from the NCES (2021) shows that 89% of White students and 80% of Black students graduated from high school within four years during the 2018-2019 school year. In South Carolina, 84% of White students and 76% of Black students graduated within four years. Locally, in CHS’s district, White students had a 93% on-time graduation rate and Black students had an 80.6% on-time graduation during the 2019-2020 school year. While this graduation rate gap has seen improvement, the
researcher’s hypothesis is that the gap between White and Black students would be slightly larger when the category of “two or more races” was included.

In South Carolina, the dropout rate for Black students was also higher than White students; 8% vs. 4.9%. Published in August 2019, the 2017-2018 South Carolina Dropout Report showed similarities with national data. During the 2014-2015 school year, Coastal High School's district had 98 White students drop out compared to 246 nonwhite students. During the 2015-2016 school year, 119 White students dropped out compared to 294 nonwhite students. During the 2016-2017 school year, 121 White students dropped out compared to 358 nonwhite students. This was by far the most alarming year based on the numerical data alone. Finally, during the 2017-2018 school year, 85 White students dropped out compared to 264 nonwhite students. It is necessary to note that although the category of "nonwhite" categorizes all students who are not White together, there is a very low percentage of minority students who are not African American at Coastal High School's district. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were 49,698 total students enrolled in CHS’s district and 23,566 of those students were White, and 18,886 students were Black.

While the past failures of the school systems and the injustices that our Black students have faced cannot be repaired, we can look forward and vow to make a change and shift towards a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students. This can happen by looking through the Critical Race lens and understanding the causes of deficits and the opportunities to improve the issues by understanding the theories and practices that offer hope for equality and educational success.
Factors Outside the Classroom that May Increase Student Success

Familial Support

Despite the bleak outlook that Black students may have considering the countless barriers that they have faced and will continue to face in education, there are many success stories. The success stories frequently have a common storyline of an influential adult or mentor in their school or in their personal life who motivates them, encourages them, and supports them. If Black students cannot connect with an adult in the school, a family member becomes the driving force for success. Robert B. Hill (1997), a sociologist, author, and researcher who advocates for African American equality and civil rights suggested one of the many strengths of Black families is the strong kinship bonds experienced between its members. There are values placed on children, strong, protective mothers, respect for elders, family unity, and family loyalty. The students in this study all had a strong relationship with a family member whom they contributed their success and resilience to. Hill (1997) also pointed out that Black families provide emotional, financial, and social support by parenting, advising, caretaking, childcare, and informal adoptions. All of the participants in this study validate the truth within these statements.

Involvement in the Church

Another powerful influence that supports Black students outside of the school setting is their connection with religion and their church. Sanders (1998) found a significant positive relationship between religious involvement and Black student attitudes, behavior, and success in school. Barrett (2009) completed a study that showed that Black urban students in poverty who attended church services had a significantly higher mean grade point average than students who rarely or never attend any services. Multiple
participants in this study were active in their church community. One participant in particular stated that he was very involved in the church and he along with his siblings and cousins would be the first ones to enter the church and be the last ones to leave because his uncle was a trustee there. Churches offer a unified community safe from discrimination and where Black students feel valued and supported (Barrett, 2009). Religion has been an influential part of many Black American lives throughout history. Attending church and having a strong connection to religion gave Black families a respite from their daily lives that centered around feeling less than others because of laws that made them inferior to White people. “In a segregated society, church was the place where people fulfilled their human potential” (Soaries, 2010). Additionally, churches in the area of the participants in this study are very supportive of education and offer multiple college scholarships. Some of these scholarships include the Reverend Pinckney Scholarship, the Reverend Doctor E.L Jackson and Christine O. Jackson Scholarship, and the Mother Emmanuel A.M.E Scholarship Endowment.

Resiliency

The resiliency that Black students have cannot be ignored. The constant force of systemic oppression and discrimination must be dealt with on a daily basis and it takes a strong background of familial support as mentioned above, a positive friend group, or involvement in extracurricular activities to drown out the noise from society. In the 2008 report, “Resilience of African American Children and Adolescents: A Vision for Optimal Development” created by the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, proximal risk factors are discussed. The proximal risk factors included are under-resourced schools, family disruption, and negative peer influences,
and these risks are further intensifying the experience of pervasive racism that informs such as racial profiling, low expectations, or institutional barriers. All of the participants in this study encountered these proximal risk factors and could have easily succumbed to them, but they were resilient and forged on.

Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities provide a space for students to create bonds with their peers and teachers over shared interests and learn invaluable skills such as work ethic, social skills, and time management. All of the participants in this study had a deep connection with activities within the school that occupied their free time, encouraged thinking, advanced their interests and created meaningful relationships with peers and teachers or sponsors. The participants were involved with multiple programs each including the NJROTC program, DECA, the Young Gentlemen’s Club, Band, athletics, and the National Honor Society (NHS) to name a few. Students who participate in extracurricular activities experience higher levels of academic achievement. (Tolley, 2007). Through extracurricular activities student learn the importance of motivation and persistence (Fredricks, 2011) and they also have higher levels of self-concept and self-worth. (Blomfield & Barber, 2009) These skills are lifelong skills that will benefit the student in all aspects of life. While participation in general is beneficial, a positive and caring leader or teacher is crucial.

Teacher Student Relationships (TSRs)

It might seem reasonable to assume that a meaningful, positive relationship between a student and a teacher not only has the potential to create a lasting impression,
but can also facilitate the type of learning that can impact a student cognitively, emotionally, and socially for the rest of their life (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). "Students who have close, positive, and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflict in their relationships" (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2017). This significant type of relationship has the ability to create a classroom environment that allows a student to feel empowered and confident enough to ask questions, make mistakes, openly debate, and grow as a student and individual. Multiple participants in this study described a classroom environment where this was not the case. Often, when a student lacks the opportunity to connect with a teacher, the learning environment and degree of achievement may suffer. Student confidence and empowerment grows through trusting relationships (Rhoden, 2017).

The concept of a trusting relationship between students and teachers is often referred to as "trust culture" (Erdogan, 2016). The "trust culture" concept frequently results in an improvement in achievement. "Without trust, students' energy is diverted toward self-protection and away from learning" (Tschannen-Moran, 2000, p. 4). Trust culture is a critical component in a school as it will create a more positive school culture and more efficient and effective teacher operations and efforts (Zepeda, 2007, p. 22; Windschitl & Joseph, 2011). When the relationship between a student and teacher frequently involves conflict and negative experiences, it will likely be difficult for the student to engage in the content wholeheartedly, if at all. When a trusting relationship is
lost, the learning environment will often be less productive, and it may lead to other students within the environment suffering as well. Students who suffer the most significant impact from poor teacher student relationships are academically at-risk students, specifically those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have learning difficulties (Roorda et al., 2011). In a 2017 article titled, “Teachers Racial Bias Matters More for Students of Color” found in the NYU Steinhardt News, the fact that a negative teacher relationship can be emotionally damaging to a student was highlighted. The article states,

Teach...
Black students generate massive hurdles to overcome in the classroom (Henfield & Washington, 2012; Simmons, 2014). These barriers are of importance considering the reality that our country is that as of 2019, 53.9% of the students in grades K-12 are children of color, yet 80 percent of their teachers are White (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2020).

In contrast, a 2020 report published by the Institute of Education Sciences, stated that nationally, 79% of teachers were White during the 2017-2018 school year. In the state of South Carolina, out of the 51,971 teachers in 2019, 8,055 were Black teachers based on the statistics on the South Carolina Department of Education’s website. More specifically, in the research participant’s district, 2,654 teachers identified as White and 438 teachers identified as Black. A slight variation in the percentage of teachers is possible because 123 teachers failed to report their race.

National, state, and local data shows that it is nearly impossible for Black students to avoid having a White teacher; therefore, the significance of White teachers actively attempting to implement a culturally relevant and equitable curriculum is imperative. Black students may have more to lose if they do not form a positive and trusting TSR (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006) because that relationship might be the only way to break systemic stereotypes of the teachers.

At the core of deficit ideology is the belief that inequalities result, not from unjust social conditions such as systemic racism or economic injustice but from intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be inherent in disenfranchise individuals and communities. (Gorski, 2010, p. 4)
Teachers may inadvertently fail to realize, the curriculum they teach is deeply rooted in White European culture in terms of values, religions, art, languages, and perspectives (Hyland, 2005). Eurocentric curricula perpetuate the idea that Westerners are more intelligent, innovative, creative, and generally superior to all other people (Thibert, 2014). This deficit perspective perpetuates the negative stereotypes that marginalized communities are intellectually, morally, and culturally inferior (Gorski, 2011; Villenas, 2001; Weiner, 2003; Burton, Hampton-Garland, & Mizelle-Johnson, 2017). A teacher may overcompensate and try to give additional attention and interventions to students who are viewed as being in the at-risk category. While the best intentions may be in play, this mindset is problematic and should be avoided because it promotes the subtle racism in the classroom and non-White students are viewed as needing to be saved or altered to fit into the White standard of successful (Atkins & Oglesby, 2016). Teachers in public schools must rethink, renegotiate, and transform their traditional curriculum models to design curricula that incorporate different ethnicities and cultures and are more inclusive (Milner, 2005). When the curriculum deficits are identified, teachers and educators can begin to incorporate alternative teaching methods and mindsets to promote equity within the learning environment.

This research study focuses on four students’ perspectives and experiences during their high school career at Coastal High School (CHS) [pseudonym]. Approaching the research from their lived experiences will help discover issues that may have been overlooked and the potential insights and solutions that may not have been addressed in previously published studies. The importance of the location of CHS is especially imperative to note in this study due to its intimate connection with slavery. In fact, the
particular area in South Carolina was responsible for the buying and selling of 149,429
African slaves from the documented total of 308,189 African slaves who entered the
United States of America (O'Malley, 2017). Before the Civil War, nearly half of the
homes in South Carolina owned slaves (Bowers, Smith, Adcox, Hawes, & Moore,
2018). The students who are descendants of these slaves have grown up in and around a
city rooted in slavery, and all participants but one, were never truly taught anything
worthwhile about their culture in school. The only participant who received a culturally-
relevant experience as he stated, received the experiences during elementary school when
he attended a school that consisted of almost all Black students and teachers.

The reality of a historically Eurocentric White middle-class curriculum has long
been detrimental to African American students (Akena, 2012; Gray, Hope, & Byrd,
2019), including the students involved in this study. The origin of American education
was saturated in a White supremacist perspective because the curriculum, textbooks, and
any other learning materials focused on the White, Anglo Saxon beliefs and were written
by White men. The most evident display can be seen in history classes and the textbooks
that are provided. While slavery and a fraction of the African American struggle and
journey has been introduced in textbooks by this point in history, it is still a fraction of
the material that could be taught. Tyrone Howard, a professor of education at UCLA in
the Urban Schooling Division of the Graduate School of Education and Information
Studies He states, “Issues pertaining to race and more importantly racism have been
conspicuously absent from most of the discourse, research, and scholarship within the
social studies” (2003, p.28). Donald Yacavone, a historian and associate at Hutchins
Center for African & African American research agrees with the lack of multicultural and inclusive education, particularly in social studies. He states,

White supremacy is a toxin. The older history textbooks were like syringes that injected the toxin of white supremacy into the mind of many generations of Americans. What has to be done is teach the truth about slavery as a central institution in America’s origins…”

(2020).

There is a lack of awareness that the curriculum is based on "white ideas" by "white authors" due to colonization, which "normalized whiteness and made blackness invisible" (Peters, 2015, p. 641). Ladson-Billings (1998) states these curriculums "legitimize white, upper-class males as the standard knowledge students need to know” (p.18). The Southern participants in this study are a product of this reality, and they have rarely received the opportunity to be educated in an environment that was culturally relevant and equitable. Further complicating the situation is the disconnect between the teachers and the local culture. While it is difficult to find any documented data, based on the discussions with teachers throughout the years and the introductory personal information that is provided to the staff, the researcher hypothesizes that at least 75% of the teachers at CHS are "from off," as locals would say. The phrase "from off" simply refers to anyone who is from another area in the country (Hicks, 2016; Morris, 2016). This additional barrier for teachers creates an added challenge while attempting to build essential connections within the classroom. An additional piece of data is that 96 out of the 110 teachers at CHS are White as of 2019. While there are Black support staff members within the school building, such as teacher aides, student concern specialists,
According to the South Carolina Department of Education’s website, During the 2018-2019 school year, the student population comprised 44.7% Black students, 43.4% White students, and the remaining 11.9% was a mixture of Hispanic, Asian, and "other." It is necessary to note that the "other" category includes students with two or more races listed, including Black. Additionally, there is a subcategory of Black students in the Lowcountry area and that is the population that identifies as Gullah/Geechee. While it is impossible to determine exactly how many Black students are descendants of the Gullah/Geechee due to their out-migration and the immigration of African Americans from other regions, the available census data and local data provides a rough estimate. There were between 159,222 and 262,623 Gullah/Geechee people reported in the 2000 census for the coastal counties of South Carolina and Georgia and in a 2005 National Park Service report, the estimation was around 200,000 people. The 2005 report was still the reference in a 2016 article titled, “The Gullah People Have Survived on the Sea Islands for Centuries. Now Development is Taking a Toll” by Nigel Duara. In this article, Duara states, “A firm count of their total population on the Sea Islands and the interior coast is difficult, with some communities as small as 70 people living in remote hummocks and islands” (Para. 12). The following section provides a glimpse into a unique culture that presents itself within the Lowcountry schools.

**The Gullah/Geechee Heritage**

Some of students in this study embody the Black American culture and language patterns of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as well as the influences of the
Gullah/Geechee language and culture. Despite the official background of these students, varying levels of the Gullah/Geechee language are often spoken with their family and friends. Gullah is a distinctive dialect, and the culture permeates many of the lives of the Black students who were born-and-raised in the Lowcountry regardless of their heritage and whether they realize it or not. However, the Gullah/Geechee culture is rarely studied or acknowledged within the school's curriculum as of 2019 and the assimilation pressures have driven the language to the brink of extinction (Hamilton, 2012).

Once the people of these countries were taken from their homes and brought to America, they were isolated from other Africans who spoke over 40 different tribal languages (Nichols, 2009). The necessity for communication with each other and the need to understand English launched the Gullah language. "Gullah speakers, facing discrimination in school and employment settings, remain virtually incarcerated in an identity that is synonymous with lack: lack of means, lack of opportunity, lack of education" (Hamilton, 2012, p. 53). In Coastal High School's district, discussions about incorporating the Gullah/Geechee culture within the curriculum has been a vocalized topic of interest since 2017, initiated by a board member who had concerns forwarded to him regarding the lack of knowledge that teachers had with the language and culture. Finally, in 2019, a district-wide strategic plan was introduced utilizing the input of community members, school board members, teachers, and other stakeholders to support the Gullah/Geechee initiative and the overall cultural competence of the staff in the district. The 2020-2021 school year was the first year that educators were provided with the training. The importance of preserving a culture and language while simultaneously learning about a large population of students was brought to the forefront. While the
future may look a little brighter for our marginalized population, there is more work to be done. With the exception of staff training, the students are rarely if ever given the opportunity to learn about their own culture outside of their homes. In an article titled Mother Tongues and Captive Identities: Celebrating and “Disappearing,” The Gullah/Geechee Coast, Dr. Kendra Hamilton, a professor, poet, and a Lowcountry native shared that the Gullah/Geechee heritage and language is merely a cultural curiosity and it is only examined in limited contexts which have no power in the educational system or governing systems (Hamilton, 2012). Providing a curriculum that is dispersed through the filter of the dominant culture eliminates the possibility of any marginalized populations to learn about their own culture and lived experiences. The impact of the educational system being filtered through the lens of the White, dominant culture can be seen through the academic deficits and overrepresentation of negative educational experiences for marginalized populations and it is detrimental to our students to categorize every Black person the same as this is the basis for essentialism and Critical Race Theory decries essentialism.

The hypothesis here is that if teachers make efforts to incorporate discussions and information about race and the Gullah/Geechee culture within the curriculum in addition to traditional African American culture, there will likely be significant changes to the overall school culture and academic success of students. Implementing a culturally relevant curriculum requires the understanding that educators need to insert education into culture instead of inserting culture into education (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.1). In a country where the majority of teachers are White while the Black and other marginalized student populations are increasing steadily, the focus on preparing teachers to become
culturally competent and experienced as well as thoughtful of students who may be different from them should be a necessary focus for the educational preparation programs of pre-service teachers. (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) "Teacher preparation programs should continue to prioritize preparing a predominantly White middle-class teaching force for work with culturally diverse populations, including Black males" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2019). As times change and the demographics of marginalized students continues to grow while the racial composition of teachers relatively remains the same, the teacher preparation programs must include a heavy culturally-relevant teaching component.

While many teachers are hesitant to discuss racial issues within their classroom settings, failure to engage in critical discussions about race will only further divide a nation with increasing racial diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 30).

In a 2014 study by Jennifer Martin, the concept of teaching through the lens of Critical Race Theory is discussed. Ms. Martin acknowledged that she had White privilege, and she had been teaching her content area that way. She was able to make it a priority to educate herself and face the topic of discrimination head-on to create a more culturally inclusive lesson. The silence around race and racism is called colorblindness and "colormuteness," according to Martin (2014). The misunderstanding that color should be ignored and that teachers should pretend to be colorblind is more harmful than helpful. In a 2012 study by Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers titled "Racial Color-Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications,” the topic of race is understood to be uncomfortable at times, so many teachers adopt the mindset that everyone is equal, and race does not matter. However, that may only make the environment worse. "White individuals who avoid mentioning race appear more biased in the eyes of Black observers
than do White individuals who openly talk about race" (p. 206). Also, schools that are permitted to regulate their schools' diversity often follow a diversified general curriculum but tend to leave out the differences within groups. (Apfelbaum et al., 2012, p.206). Most educators are not trained to talk about race. The framework of culturally responsive teaching centers around being more than colorblind; it's about being kind and treating students equally (Martin, 2014, p. 248). Although the intentions of teachers may be reasoned as "good," avoiding the topic of race altogether, most likely continues the perception that everything is fine, and all students are being treated equally. It is critical to be cognizant of students' lived experiences and understand that they have most likely had different educational experiences from those of their teachers. Teachers can play a more active role in their Black students' lives, and that has the potential to make a more significant impact than merely stating that they are essential. "These kinds of teachers and adults in the school are cultural brokers, leaders, and mediators who provide Black adolescents with the skills they need to persist in school and become upwardly mobile" (Carter, 2008, p. 28). The teachers who sincerely desire to make a difference for Black students are the teachers who want to see their students succeed outside of their classroom. (Noguera, 2003) These teachers are focused on long-term success, and they do not view the student population as a test score that needs to improve. It is posited that students can sense that authenticity, and they will be more eager and willing to form meaningful relationships with their teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The exclusionary factors that occur within the educational system for Black and other marginalized students provided the vision when selecting influential theorists who
will be able to create a meaningful theoretical framework for this study. Beginning with theorists who can provide an understanding of the social and emotional importance of the educational environment to the theorists who can provide information and suggestions about how the educational system can improve for our future generations, the following theorists offer insight into why inclusive environments for all students are beneficial socially, emotionally, and academically. All students need the proper support and empathy to thrive, and that is what Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, Urie Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, and Nel Nodding's Pedagogy of Caring offer. Critical Race Theory captures the importance of the previous theories and emphasizes the importance of race and equity within them.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory helps us understand how the lack of social familiarity for students in the classroom can lead to the feeling of being excluded from learning and the overall sense of inferiority. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, most known for his theory of a sociocultural route to cognitive development, believed that learning is most effective when communication from another more knowledgeable person occurs. (Newman & Latifi, 2020) In the case of this study, the teacher is the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and as Vygotsky (1986) points out, “imitation is indispensable” (p. 188). Social Development Theory suggests that social development goes hand-in-hand with education since acquiring knowledge comes mainly from daily interactions with people and environments. Intelligence is a social, dialogic product, and it can be increased or remain stagnant and suppressed based on the experiences that
students encounter. Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development” stressed that teachers need to meet students where they are, not where they should be.

Difficulties in the classroom may occur when Black students are required to learn by means of a typical Eurocentric discourse in schools. Peter Smagorinsky (2007), a distinguished research professor of English and author pointed out that Black students are entering kindergarten, often with different norms and knowledge, yet the teacher in the classroom will most likely match the cultural standards of the White students (Smagorinsky, 2007). Vygotsky’s Funds of Knowledge (FOK) concept supports Smagorinsky’s statement. "FOK is the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual help, individual functioning, and wellbeing" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez; 2001; p. 133). All students enter the school building with funds of knowledge and some are more prepared for the dominant culture’s experience, and this leaves African American students with an educational disadvantage right from the start because the perceived "right" way to behave and learn may be different from theirs (Kozol, 2005). The hypothesis is that the immediate disadvantage of marginalized populations can be drastically minimized if culturally relevant teaching in utilized as early as possible in schools. This approach would be beneficial if it was implemented equally throughout all schools, so the funds of knowledge can be as similar as possible.

The perceived effect of the incongruent funds of knowledge and lack of culturally relevant teaching can be inferred by the researcher in this study when looking at the data of the Coastal High School’s two feeder schools. According to the most recent Civil Rights Data Collection report in 2017 found at ocrdata.sc.gov, one middle school in this
study had a 60.9% Black population, 26.4% White population, and a 2.4% “other” population. The in-school suspension rate for Black students was 76.6% and the “two or more races” category had a 6.2% in-school suspension rate while White students accounted for 10.9%. Similarly, the out of school suspension rate for Black students was 80%, “two or more races” was 4.2%, and the White students was 14%. The most concerning statistic was the 73.7% of Black students and the 5.3% “two or more races” students who were referred to law enforcement as opposed to the 15.8% of White students. The other main feeder school consisted of 37.8% Black students, 48.3% White students, and 5.3% labeled as “other.” The in-school suspension rate for the Black population was 68.5% and the “two or more races” category while White students accounted for 21.7%. Similarly, the out of school suspension rate for Black students was 64.5%, “two or more races” was 7.9%, and White students was 23.7%. The most concerning factor again was that 100% of the referrals to law enforcement were Black students.
There are obvious differences in academic progress and behavioral norms that the students bring to CHS, and subsequently, their needs differ and they will need more supports to reduce the educational debt. Teachers become frustrated because they are expected to remedy the deficits from prior years and increase academic knowledge and test scores to help all students become college and/or career ready. While growth is necessary and vital, not all student growth looks the same, yet failing test scores that will appear on the school report card publicly that is the reality that teachers must face. In an article titled, “May I be excused? Why Teachers Leave the Profession” by John Buchanan, a teacher participant expressed her concern about the achievement gap and the pressure teachers face. She stated, “Constant pressure about measuring achievement of children with no consideration taken into account of individual circumstances. (2010, p. 204). The individual circumstances that are necessary to understand are poverty levels, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and more. Vygotsky stated that the traditional curriculum and testing only focus on the student's actual development level and pay little
attention to the student's potential level of development (Johnson, 2004). Vygotsky also believed that a higher level of mental functioning, such as active listening, rational thought, and learning, is initiated by the student's sociocultural environment (Johnson, 2004). While testing is an important factor in assessing the growth of students, the tests do not take a student’s background into account. Other forms of assessments would be beneficial when evaluating the academic growth of a student.

The lack of alternative teaching methods and educational opportunities often lead to assumptions that Black students are academically behind their White counterparts as well as dealing with more frequent punitive actions taken against them (Smagorinsky, 2007). An effort to understand cultural differences can alleviate many of the negative interactions and outcomes that Black students are faced with. Teachers must attempt to make efforts to learn about their students and their families to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct what is taught in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). An increased understanding of Black students' perceptions about race and knowledge of the benefits of formal education for social and economic mobility can help educators identify and utilize pedagogies and practices that promote academic achievement and healthy and positive identity (Carter, 2008; Millner, 2013). Vygotsky also created key terminologies that have been incorporated into his theory. These can be used to better understand development and to guide the creation of more appropriate teaching methods for Black students. The Vygotskian terms are the More Knowledgeable Other, Scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development will be discussed in the upcoming section.

The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO):
Positive relationships with adults who are supportive of educational growth are essential when connecting the concept of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) to classroom learning. Considering the teacher will be the MKO in the classroom, it is critical for the teacher to have a culturally relevant caring space that promotes equity and success for all students. Teachers of Black and other marginalized populations must be knowledgeable about the cultural norms of Black students and be willing to support those differences. Teachers must also be sensitive enough to confront political challenges that students face, and facilitate a space where students can connect to their communities. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Foster, 1997, & Howard, 2001). If this type of environment is not valued or implemented, the students will suffer in the long run.

When working with Black children, there is a fine line in representing the role of an MKO. The teacher should not lack the humility that is necessary to admit that he or she does not know everything, even though they are the adult in the room. Educators should be curious, respectful, and knowledgeable about Black history and culture.

Whether a teacher has taught Black students for decades or months, White teachers should not assume that they know the struggles of being African American (El-Mekki, 2017; Maitra, 2017). Educators need to connect on deeper levels with their students and communicate positively as data shows that this kind of interaction leads to better outcomes for the teacher and the students (LaPoma & Kantor, 2013; Reichert & Hawley, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the potential for cognitive growth in children when they are in the presence of an adult or peer (MKO) who has more knowledge than they do. "Assistance in the ZPD functions most effectively when it is tailored to the learner, adapted and eventually withdrawn in response to learner development" (Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1996, as cited in Fani & Ghaemi, 2001, p. 1550).

Vygotsky believed that the traditional teaching model of lecturing material and having the students regurgitate the material as if they truly have learned it is fruitless. (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 150 as cited in Fani & Ghaemi, 2001). Also, "Vygostky's analysis suggests that school learning may occur optimally when the novice has sufficiently developed spontaneous concepts learned in practical/community contexts that are related to scientific concepts learned in formal school contexts" (Daniels, 2005, p. 255; Lee, 2005).

This Vygotskian method of learning complements Black students due to the different background knowledge that they may have upon entering school. Lecture and regurgitation of concepts and facts may not be the most useful way to acquire knowledge, however, learning through visuals and kinesthetic methods allow students to connect more authentically, especially when information is scaffolded.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding refers to the "abundance of teacher supports during the initial stage of a student learning a task" (Lerner & Johns, 2012). Like a building structure supported by the scaffolding, a student must be supported by his or her teacher, and when the content is understood, the scaffolding can be removed. The teacher's support allows the students to feel cared for and encouraged throughout the learning process. The human connection in
student-teacher relationships is critical for success to occur as the reader will see in the multiple participant’s interviews when teacher support is discussed.

*Social Interaction*

Vygotsky's Social Interaction principle stresses the importance of human connection. Language, behaviors, beliefs, and traditions are all vital for a teacher to know when teaching a student with a different culture than his or her own and is this understanding is the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy. Social norms differ from culture to culture, and educating oneself of those differences can help a teacher avoid conflict (Rosebery, McIntyre, & Gonzalez, 2001; Maitra, 2017). Several studies have found that, at least in some Black communities, the school's behavioral values are quite uncommon and unfamiliar from those that the students might practice in their home lives. For instance, in the church, their congregation might promote active and lively participation (Kochman, 2007). This type of involvement would be very different from the expectations of involvement in a traditional classroom setting. A teacher's knowledge and understanding of student's backgrounds and social norms can reduce conflict within the classroom. Kochman (2007) notes that the difference between Black and White cultural differences is typically ignored and the assumption that both groups are functioning under identical speech and general agreements, but those average and accepted cultural norms are based on Eurocentric belief models. As the previous data shows, the majority of teachers are composed of White women, and behaviors differing from what they consider to be "normal" classroom interactions and behavior often lead to violations resulting in discipline thus creating a cycle of mistrust, negative behaviors, disconnect and apathy. Frequently, after being disciplined for acting in ways that they
believe are appropriate, Black students feel that they have been punished unfairly, thus creating even greater separation between them and the school (Smagorinsky, 2007). Incorporating a student's home language into a classroom will provide the students with the best chance to experience academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, when the student's home language might be viewed as wrong or inappropriate, students will learn how to code-shift in certain atmospheres such as the classroom.

Code-switching is the term used to describe the dialectical shift between the same language, such as Standard English and Black English (Greene & Walker, 2004; Flowers, 2000). Prior to this term, W.E.B. Du Bois described the necessity for Black people to live in a state of “double consciousness.” Du Bois (1904) shared his longing to preserve his Black identity and culture while also belonging to the White American culture that is valued. He desperately wanted Black people to exist as themselves and be granted the same respect and opportunities as other Americans, but the necessity to live a double life has changed very little in the 120 years since the dreams of Du Bois. Black Americans still feel the pressures of being required to speak differently to ensure they have access to many of the same opportunities that White people have. Code-switching is a learned skill that can be reinforced by teachers within the classroom. If Black children are not taught how to code-switch, they are being denied entry into society's dominant discourses (Delpit, 2003). The art of code-switching for Black students provides them an opportunity to participate in what is considered acceptable and appropriate academic language, and it allows students to manage in a society in which they are a racial minority (Greene & Walker, 2004). All participants in this study noted the need to code-switch to either fit in, advance academically, or create a more comfortable
environment for the dominant White culture. Code-shifting is a vital learned skill because "to those with limited knowledge of Black culture and linguistics, Black English is mistakenly assumed to be a product of ignorance rather than a creative form of verbal communication as complex as Standard English" (Labov 1972, as cited by Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018). Teachers who acknowledge and respect the diversity in their classrooms and strive to educate themselves about the different cultures of their students contribute to an overall positive climate. Positive climates promote growth for all students, as extensive studies indicate that a negative classroom environment inhibits growth. Classroom climates that a student may perceive as being cold and unwelcoming toward historically marginalized groups are detrimental to cognitive development, including reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010). Classroom climates that are empathetic and caring will likely increase student growth and development, and environments that are not conducive to promoting diversity and acceptance and continue the never-ending cycle of cultural ignorance, fall into the philosophies of Critical Race Theory.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as a movement of activists and scholars who were interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, power, and racism. CRT involves many of the same concepts as civil rights but also includes economics, history, education, and feelings (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001).

Critical Race Theory initially emerged as a movement in the law field in the 1970s because of the response from the lack of progress of racial reform (Martinez,
Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado helped form alternative civil rights legal perspectives in the 1970s after realizing that the civil rights era of the 1960s was fizzling out and reverting in many cases, and they wanted to attack more subtle forms of racism. The first form of CRT called Critical legal studies (CLS) did not include racism in its critiques. Due to continued failures of racial reform and justice within the CRL group, a few lawyers, including the co-founder of Critical Race Theory, Mari Matsuda, left and created CRT. Critical Race Theory rapidly gained traction in the field of education due to the lived experience of many students and teachers in law school (Martinez, 2014; Peters, 2015).

CRT and its basic premises help us understand controversial topics in education, such as tracking, standardized testing, curriculum inequalities, and discipline inequalities. An intriguing aspect of CRT that delves more in-depth than other theories is that people who use it do not merely try to understand it; they try to become advocates and attempt to change policies and inequalities. Hence, CRT was born, and many racial issues came to the forefront because racism is so intertwined within the fabric of our society, it is no wonder why it appears reasonable to people in this culture (Ladson-Billings, 2003). One of the main goals of CRT is to break down the barriers of racism and oppression through education and information, which is why many educators use this theory to examine the racial injustice within their schools. CRT is a framework that offers researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers a race-conscious approach to understanding educational inequality and structural racism to find solutions that lead to greater justice (Price, 2019; Gillborn, 2006). The researcher suggests that White allies are essential for promoting the goals of CRT and equality in general, and few places would be better for partners to
advocate for Black students than in school buildings. Self-awareness regarding White privilege and racism is critical in developing an empathic alliance with racially and ethnically diverse students (Mindrup, Spray & Lamberghini-West, 2011). Teachers have the ideal opportunity to listen to young students' voices and experiences and create an inclusive environment that allows them to be comfortable enough to discuss racial issues. Teachers can promote the reality that education can equal freedom. The main goal of knowledge should be to create students capable of doing new things, not simply regurgitating information that has been learned for generations (Piaget, 1964).

One of the major supporters and advocates of Critical Race Theory applied to education is Gloria Ladson-Billings. Her ideas and beliefs are intertwined throughout this research study. Critical Race Theory examines racial inequities in educational achievement more critically than multicultural education or achievement gap theorists because it centers the discussion within the context of racism (Ladson-Billings, 2003). In her article, "Just what is critical race theory, and what is it doing in a nice field like education?" Ladson-Billings highlights the central tenets of Critical Race Theory as outlined by Delgado & Stafancic (2001) and Carter (2008).

The Five Tenets of CRT

The first tenet states that racism is ordinary, not "normal science" in American society, and it calls for strategies to expose it in various forms. The fact that racism is so entangled in the fabric of our social order, it seems to be normal to people in this culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings also points out that because racism is so typical in our society, the very act of it needs to be unmasked and exposed.
The second tenet states that the dominant society creates myths and assumptions such as stereotypes to create the overarching belief about a race, which inevitably decides that African Americans and other minorities are not of the same value as Whites based on the current needs of society (Delgado & Stafancic, 2000). The majority race seems to have the power to choose what society believes about the minority populations (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These narratives are dangerous in an educational setting because there is ample opportunity for students of color to feel less than the educators in charge. Crenshaw (1988) addresses the way that the White, dominant culture established the symbolic use of the word “other” to create a unity among White people to oppose any of the non-White groups, or “others.”

The third tenet states that challenging traditional and dominant norms is beneficial because it raises the question about standard terms such as "colorblindness," "objectivity," and "equal opportunity" (Martinez, 2013). The physical traits such as hair texture and skin color are minuscule differences compared to what people have in common with each other such as personality and intelligence. However, society ignores the scientific and biological facts and focuses more on physical traits. Color blindness is simply our official talk about race in the United States. If one tries to articulate race in any other register, one is struck by its dominance in the public sphere by getting invalidated, silenced, or ridiculed. Color blindness structures this debate so rigidly that most debates appear ritualized (Kromidas, 2016). A commitment to CRT scholars is to participate and lead to social justice activism (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The fourth tenet states that centrality is necessary for experiential knowledge. This is where stereotypes arise and the importance of unlearning beliefs that are reported
as truths. CRT calls this "storytelling" and "counter-storytelling," and using these techniques in an educational setting can assist with dispelling fallacies communicated about races. The interview participants in this study use the counter-storytelling approach to help the researcher understand their lived experiences.

The fifth and final tenet states we must have an interdisciplinary perspective, meaning that we must not believe everything that we have learned about race relations improving and advancing. This can be seen in concepts such as affirmative action and the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. These laws benefit the majority just as much or even more than they benefit the minority. The fifth tenet states that the White majority only allows decisive action to be taken for minorities if there is a benefit for them as well (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Delgado, 2009).

Critical Race Theory is pervasive in the educational system and its beliefs are so embedded into American lives that the five tenets seem normal and were rarely questioned until recently. CRT has Americans divided because it forces the uncomfortable of race to be discussed by the law makers of the country. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, an originator of CRT, and the head of the African American Policy Forum stated that CRT “is a practice—a way of seeing how the fiction of race has been transformed into concrete racial inequities” (2020, para. 8). Crenshaw also stated that CRT is “an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what’s in the past is in the past, and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it” (2020, para. 9). Exposing the problematic factors of the CRT mindset and implementing beliefs and mindsets from theories that positively impact experiences that marginalized
people have can counteract CRT. Gloria Ladson-Billings and her work of culturally relevant pedagogy does just that. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a significant advocate for Black and other marginalized students, whose work is anchored in Critical Race Theory is a South Carolina native and a beneficial reference for any White educator who teaches a diverse student population.

Ladson-Billings began her journey towards making a pedagogical change for African Americans and other marginalized populations in 1990. Instead of questioning the deficits and asking what was wrong with African American students, she began to ask what is right with them and how she could assist teachers with this realization and process (Ladson-Billings, 2014). She also spent a significant amount of time talking to teachers and analyzing their thought processes behind their teaching approach. Ladson-Billings came up with three meaningful domains: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Academic success refers to the intellectual growth that students experience based on the instruction and experience in the classroom. Cultural competence refers to the ability to assist students in appreciating and celebrating their own culture while gaining knowledge in at least one other culture. Finally, sociopolitical consciousness refers to the ability to extend learning beyond the four walls of a classroom by using school knowledge to navigate real-world situations through inquiry and exploration (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). These three domains should be utilized in an educational environment that practices a culturally relevant pedagogy. Gloria Ladson-Billings has been a distinguished professor of Urban Studies in the field of Curriculum and Education as well as the 2005-2006 president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Ladson-Billings is most known for her research on teachers'
pedagogical practices who are successful with Black students as well as her interest in Critical Race Theory and its applications in education.

Ladson-Billings and her research and beliefs are the driving force behind this research study. She promotes specific teaching principles that will assist all teachers, specifically White teachers, to become culturally relevant teachers. Ladson-Billings (1994) proposed five specific principles that culturally relevant teachers should use. These principles are outlined in her book, The Dreamkeepers (p. 123-125):

1. Students should be treated with respect and with the belief that they are competent. This will most likely lead to competence and success. Ensure that the material that is given to minority students is challenging and believe that the students can rise to the occasion instead of providing accommodations or modifying the work to make it easier. Challenge your students and support them so they can become confident in themselves and their abilities.

2. Provide appropriate scaffolding when teaching new material. "When teachers scaffold using the prior academic and cultural knowledge of Black students, they create accessible learning opportunities and decrease potential school-home cultural dissonances" (Emdin & Lee, 2012).

   Show the students that you value their background and prior knowledge and build upon the knowledge that they already have. A teacher cannot change what type of education the students will enter the school building with. However, teachers can use prior experiences and mesh that with new material.

3. The main focus of the classroom environment is instructional, and that needs to be known and promoted from the first day that the students walk into the room. Instructional
time should begin when the first bell rings and end when the next bell rings. The more
time spent on educating the students with challenging material, the less room for
behavioral disruptions.

4. The purpose of education should be to open up a world of new knowledge to the
students and apply it to real-world situations. Memorization and busy work will not
create a lasting educational impact. Get to know your students, relate the material and
standards to their lives, and make connections. That is what the purpose of education is.

5. The most effective and captivating teachers love the subject matter that they teach, and
their enthusiasm is evident to the students. Teaching the material becomes effortless
when the teacher is an expert, and that leaves time to find ways to relate the article to the
students in exciting and memorable ways. Knowing the students and their strengths and
weaknesses will allow the teacher to be able to adapt a lesson or forewarn a student when
a sensitive topic is discussed and enable them to leave the classroom if they become
uncomfortable. Connecting with students on a personal yet professional level will
cultivate a healthy relationship in which they know that they are cared about. Many
students come into a class with the mindset of expecting teachers to demonstrate respect
before doing the same. Once they feel respected and then show the teacher respect, the
foundation has been built for meaningful learning.

Strengthening the claims of Ladson-Billings, Dr. Christopher Emdin (2016)
provides seven detailed strategies to assist teachers in connecting with Black students and
provide a meaningful learning experience. Dr. Christopher Emdin is an Associate STEM
Professor in the Teachers College at Columbia University. He also serves as the
Associate Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education. Dr. Emdin holds a
Ph.D in Urban STEM Education, multiple Master's degrees in math and science, and a public speaker and author. Thus far, his two books are *Urban Science Education for the Hip-hop Generation* and *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood and the Rest of Y'all too*. Dr. Emdin is a valuable resource for White educators. The following "Seven C's for Effective Teaching" has been adapted from Dr. Emdin's work:

1. Co-generative Dialogues (Cogens)

Co-generative dialogues allow for open communication between teachers and students. As Ladson-Billings previously discussed, getting to know your students is an essential component of culturally relevant teachers. Emdin (2016) uses the term co-generative dialogues when promoting communication with students of all backgrounds outside of the classroom to gain insight into the students' perspectives on schooling. Co-generative dialogue is defined as a form of structured discourse in which teachers and students engage in a collaborative effort to help identify and implement positive changes in a classroom's teaching and learning practices (Martin, 2006, p. 694).

2. Co-Teaching

Co-teaching is the process of teachers using the strengths of their students to customize lessons and allow for the opportunity for all students to feel that they are all equally valued. The epitome of co-teaching, highlighted in a 2019 article by Denisa Superville titled, "These Students are Doing PD With Their Teachers. Their Feedback is Candid." This article embodies the practices and beliefs that Dr. Emdin has, and that is to involve students in creating a more exciting and engaging curriculum. The goal of this particular school was to have the students "work with teachers on developing culturally inclusive practices, examining biases, and working to ensure students' identities and cultures are
reflected in curriculum" (Superville, 2019). The act of allowing students to have a voice tackled the chronic problem of truancy and unnecessary and imbalanced disciplinary referrals between Black and White students, and it had a positive effect. This problem is similar to the researcher's school, and this concept might be worth looking deeper into it. Positive and respectful relationships between students and teachers truly matter.

3. Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is the premise that the educators in the school allow the students to feel like participants in school instead of guests. All members and stakeholders involved with the school take on roles in helping the school operate properly. Cosmopolitanism is similar to co-teaching because students have a chance to feel valued and an equal participant in the education process.

4. Context

Context refers to the immersion of teachers in their schools' communities. The process does not merely invite community members to the school grounds, but the teachers and school employees make efforts to venture out into their students' community. The teachers who show that they have an interest in and value the meaningful places to their students speaks volumes. Context can mean going to a football game, a theatrical play, or a robotics tournament. When a student physically sees an adult supporting them, it means so much. While parental involvement is most likely preferred, the assumption that all students have parents who can support them is a fallacy. These are the situations where teachers can step in and assist with creating a supportive community for that student. Research suggests that many minority parents are not involved in their child's schooling; however, there are many reasons behind that reality, including
language and culture barriers, work schedules, lack of child care, lack of transportation, and the feeling of inferiority or incompetence. (Wallace, 2013, p. 196)

5. Content

Content refers to the practice of teachers learning with their students by being less of the expert and allowing themselves to become vulnerable. Vulnerability lowers the walls and creates opportunities for building relationships and trust. The classroom becomes a place for inquiry and problem-solving and not just right and wrong answers and memorization.

6. Competition

Competition refers to the healthy and positive competition and collaboration between students. Competition is vital because it has the potential to allow the experience of group success. The teacher and students must create and commit to rules to allow for respectful discourse. "Learning occurs through sharing and actively listening to different viewpoints, but students need to feel safe to express different viewpoints and to know that their perspectives will be valued and respected" (Garibay, 2015, p. 8).

7. Curation

Curation refers to the process in which teachers study themselves to improve their teaching methods. Teachers who believe in curation are interested in being lifelong learners and always looking for ways to improve. The students who have been selected in this study allow the researcher to gain a different perspective on the educational life of a Black student. This process is completed through extensive interviews to help the researcher's curation process. Educators who are interested in improving for their students are typically interested in their students' wellbeing and are open to change. This attitude is essential for a multicultural classroom.
The culturally relevant teaching methods from Ladson-Billings (1994) and the Seven C’s for Effective Teaching from Christopher Emdin (2016) both exemplify the philosophies that Vygotsky, Brofenbrenner, and Noddings stress: the ability to have empathy and the act of teachers utilizing empathic mindsets create the potential for healthy and productive educational environments. Adhering to this mindset and using the framework of Critical Race Theory will give the new generation of teachers the ability to create positive change in the future by being aware and willing to learn about different races and cultures.

In a country in which the majority of teachers are White while the Black and other marginalized student populations are increasing steadily, I hypothesize that the focus on preparing teachers to become culturally competent as well as mindful of students who may be different from them will be a necessary focus for the educational preparation programs of pre-service teachers. According to Ladson-Billings (2000), teacher preparation programs should prioritize preparing a predominantly White middle-class teaching force for work with culturally diverse populations. While many teachers are hesitant to discuss racial issues within their classroom settings, failure to engage in critical discussions about race will only further divide a nation with increasing racial diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 30). While these conversations may be uncomfortable, "they also draw attention to the human scale of issues that are too often reduced to an apparently technical level in academic discussion" (Gillborn, 2006, p. 23). White teachers will have to realize that biases will remain whether they are intentional or not unless those biases are respectfully confronted. Every effort should be made to understand your personal epistemologies and the effect they have on the Black student in
the classroom. These biases and assumptions can possibly have a negative effect on addressing the educational needs of the Black student (Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

In the classroom, unconscious acts of watching, coupled with the socialized perception of threat, results in racist disciplinary action (Skiba, 2011). In 2014, Jennifer Martin discussed the concept of teaching through the lens of critical race theory. Ms. Martin acknowledged the fact that she had white privilege, and she had been teaching her content area that way. She was able to make it a priority to educate herself and face the topic of discrimination head-on to create a more culturally inclusive lesson. The silence around race and racism is called colorblindness and "colormuteness," according to Martin (2014). Colorblindness discussed in a 2012 study by Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers titled "Racial Color-Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications." The topic of race is uncomfortable at times, so many teachers employ the mindset that everyone is equal, and race does not matter. However, that may only make the environment worse. "White individuals who avoid mentioning race appear more biased in the eyes of Black observers than do White individuals who openly talk about race" (p. 206). Similarly, schools that are permitted to regulate the diversity of their schools often follow a diversified general curriculum but tend to leave out the differences within groups (Apfelbaum et al., 2012, p.206).

Most educators have not learned to talk about race. The framework of culturally responsive teaching centers around being more than colorblind; it is about being kind and treating students equally (Martin, 2014, p. 248). Although teachers' intentions may be reasoned as "good," avoiding the topic of race altogether most likely continues the perception that everything is equitable in the classroom and school. The focus of physical
actions should not be the only potentially racist markers that teachers need to pay close attention to, either. We must pay attention to how we use language and understand that words, used or omitted, can devalue people and render whole groups of people invisible (Baker, 2017, p.183). It is critical to be mindful of students' lived experiences and understand that they have most likely had different educational backgrounds from those of their teachers. Teachers can play a more active role in the lives of their Black students, and that has the potential to make a more significant impact than merely stating that they are essential. "These kinds of teachers and adults in the school are cultural brokers, leaders, and mediators who provide Black adolescents with the skills they need to persist in school and become upwardly mobile" (Carter, 2008, p. 28). The teachers who sincerely desire to make a difference for Black students are the teachers who want to see their students succeed outside of their classroom. These teachers are focused on long-term success, and they do not view the student population as a test score that needs to improve. The hypothesis is that students can sense authenticity and be more eager and willing to develop meaningful relationships with their teachers if they believe the care and concern are authentic.

Considering that significant achievement gaps between White and Black students continue to exist, many advocacy groups are working on providing equity in education. Some of the advocates for curriculum reform stress that a different curriculum focus is required if racism, classism, and sexism are ever going to disappear in our schools. Subject areas such as social studies can “serve as a curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us as a nation” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 8). Eliminating the use of divisive language will be beneficial because when educators are forced to label
their students based on their deficits or characteristics, it limits their ability to improve them (Baker, 2017). Ultimately, equality, empathy, and caring in the classroom will lead to positive changes for all students. The following two theories, Biological Systems Theory and the Pedagogy of Caring are focused solely on the well-being of the students.

Bioecological Systems Theory

Urie Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory strengthens the argument that relationships are significant for the educational, social, and emotional well-being of a child. Brofenbrenner states that the development of a child is shaped by a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from the immediate settings of family and school to the broad cultural values, laws, and customs. A child’s environment can be broken down into five different systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macro system, and the chronosystem (Brofenbrenner, 1974). These systems all play an important role in the development of relationships between the student, their personal life, and their academic life.

The Microsystem

The microsystem has the most direct contact with a child in their immediate environment such as parents/guardians, teachers, and school friends. These relationships are bi-directional because the child can be influenced by one or more factors in their microsystem, but the child also has the ability to influence others as well. The relationships within the microsystems are critical to the everyday social and emotional well-being on the child and one negative aspect can affect all of the other areas. Brofenbrenner suggests that the relationships that exist within the microsystem are the most influential to a child (Curry & Misolm, 2017). Some of the interview participants in
this study had significant conflicts occurring within their microsystem and those affected every other part in their lives.

The Mesosystem

The mesosystem embodies the interactions between the child’s microsystems such as their parents and teachers. These interactions have the ability to influence the emotional status and the academic success of the child. For example, if a child’s parent does not like their teacher and speaks negatively about them in the home environment, the future interactions between the child and their teacher may be strained. Similarly, if the school environment and the information that the student is learning is incompatible from what they have learned at home, it may be emotionally distressing.

The Exosystem

The exosystem consists of the formal and informal social structure that do not directly contain the child yet have indirectly influence one or more of the child’s microsystems. Some examples include the student’s neighborhood, parent’s friends, and media coverage. The interview participant’s neighborhoods played a significant part in their development and the volatile political and racial media coverage, specifically within the last few years, has played a part in the comfort level of our marginalized youth.

The Macrosystem

The macrosystem component consists of how cultural aspects of a child’s life affects them such as socioeconomic status, culture, and ethnicity. This system is different from the previous system as it is not specific to the child because it includes the established cultural and societal norms that exist in the geographical location in which the child is developing in. Multiple interview participants in this study all embodied a similar
Gullah/Geechee cultural identity regardless of their background and they were all of a lower socioeconomic background.

**The Chronosystem**

The final level of Brofenbrenner’s bioecological systems consists of all of the environmental changes that occur during the lifetime of the child that may affect development. These changes can be minor such as a transition to another school or moving or they can be more significant such as a parent’s divorce, a death of a loved one, or a traumatic racial event that occur in the community. Traumatic racial events such as police brutality and the police murdering a community member have occurred in the area of this research city and affected the students regardless of their connection with the family.

Utilizing the knowledge from the Ecological Systems Theory, teachers have the opportunity to create a holistic approach to teaching which is inclusive of all the systems that the students and their families are involved in and improving upon their empathy and connections (Hayes & O’Toole, 2017). Increasing empathy and willingness to understand and connect with student’s lives inside and outside of school coincide with the teachings of Nel Noddings and the Pedagogy of Caring.

**Pedagogy of Caring**

Nel Noddings and her Pedagogy of Caring goes hand-in-hand with a culturally responsive pedagogy and the classroom. Teachers who cultivate a loving and caring environment will gain an increased chance of connecting with their students. The caring teacher demonstrates his or her commitment to caring by modeling caring relationships, showing herself as one caring' by being attentive and sensitive to the student, and
attending to his needs (Noddings & Gilligan, 1982). Through these caring experiences, the student develops an understanding of caring practices, which he or she can then apply towards their own lives and relationships. Caring and empathetic teachers are vital because their care directly contributes to their students' moral development (Noddings & Gilligan, 1982). Psychological safety is essential in life.

When students feel comfortable and supported, they will be more inclined to open themselves to learning. However, one must be aware that there is a difference between "caring for" and "caring about." The concept of caring about means that the teacher not only cares for the educational needs of the student, but the teacher is concerned about the student's wellbeing and environment as well. Knowing the students on a deeper level and being interested in their lives is necessary to create equally respectful relationships (Nguyen, 2016). The reality is that teachers spend the same amount of time with students, if not more than their parents, during a day. Hence, teachers bear the critical role of helping Black students develop strong resistance and socialization to cultivate a positive racial identity, including awareness of racial discrimination (Carter, 2008). Caring and respectful relationships between students and teachers can lead to a transformative educational experience. Nel Noddings emphasized that one learns to care by being cared for (Stone, 2018). Noddings also believe that caring would lead to a just society (Nodding, 2002). A just society would, in turn, affect the inequities within education as well.

Teachers can use the guidelines of Noddings daily in their classrooms. Noddings (2002) stressed that, at the very least, teachers could refer to popular culture or school or societal issues during meaningful discussions with students. Ultimately, “the student is
infinitely more important than the subject matter” (Noddings, 2013, p. 176). It might be assumed that the more effort that a teacher places into building relationships with students, the better chance students have in reaching the self-actualization level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid. It may also be assumed that the more comfortable, loved, respected, and safe that a student feels, the more meaningful learning can occur. Lisa Delpit’s concept of a teacher being a “warm demander” complements the Pedagogy of Caring. Delpit (2012) states, “These relationships are imbued with a sense of trust, confidence, and psychological safety that allows students to take risks, admit errors, ask for help, and experience failure along the way to higher levels of learning” (p. 82). A teacher who exhibits the qualities of a warm demander combines active demandingness and personal warmth. There is an explicit focus on building rapport and trust while expressing non-verbal cues like smiling and a warm and firm tone of voice. The teacher shows personal regard for students by genuinely caring about important events and people in their lives. They hold high standards and offer emotional support and instructional scaffolding. Delpit (2012) also states, “Teachers who are warm demanders help students realize that they can achieve beyond anything they may have believed” (p. 78-79). These teachers also encourage productive struggles and the students view them as caring because of personal regard and “tough love” stance. The goal is to create a classroom environment where all students can be successful. Culturally responsive educators take the extra time necessary to research the experiences, individuality, and learning styles of their students to better reach/teach them by taking the time to understand their lived experiences. A teacher can engage in conversations about students' lived experiences, social and political critique, problematizing one's privilege
and standpoint, and facilitating critical thinking (Martin, 2014). One of the goals of this research study is to ascertain whether or not the participants who graduated from CHS experienced this level of communication and support within their classrooms.

**Preparing for Change**

“There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope” Paolo Freire

The researcher hypothesizes that the identified graduated students from the target high school in this action research study experienced both culturally relevant teachers and teachers who displayed biased behaviors. As previously stated, CHS is composed of about 51% Black students, and these students can surely benefit from teachers who use a culturally relevant pedagogy to foster the necessary positive relationships with their students. Acknowledging, understanding, and accepting race issues that permeate our classrooms builds relationships (Baker, 2017, p.186).

After reviewing all of the texts used in this literature review, I am hopeful that I have enough information to support my research study. The previous studies on the topic of inclusive classrooms, teacher-student relationships, and methods that can be used to improve the classroom culture have all offered promising solutions to significant roadblocks in multicultural classrooms. One significant difference between past studies and my research study is the use of interviewing with participants who have been removed from the research location long enough to mature and reflect on their past experiences. The ability to have time for reflection will allow the participants to critically examine their experiences through the lens of an adult.
CHAPTER 3
ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe how qualitative research methods were employed to explore and analyze the relationships between White teachers and Black students, why those relationships are critical in creating a positive educational experience, and what strategies can be implemented to improve those relationships. This chapter will also provide descriptions of the student-participants who provided the data for this research to allow the reader to comprehend their experiences.

Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative research approach due to the nature of the data collection methods and limited access to the research participants. “Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals” (Mohajan, 2018). The interest lies in more than the data; it is also in the participants' perspective (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and it seeks to explain “how” and “why” a social phenomenon operates the way that it does (Mohajan, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005).

In this study, the qualitative research will utilize a small sample size that lends itself to explore research subjects more in depth rather than concentrating on breadth. A small sample size also allows for the identification of overarching themes (Levine &
Methodology
This practitioner-based qualitative research study's primary focus must also correlate with Critical Race Theory's belief system. "Qualitative research methodologies necessitate the collection and analysis of narrative data" (Mertler, 2017, p. 7). In this study, the CRT method of counter-storytelling will be used to challenge and displace the pernicious narratives of Black American students (Delgado, 2017). Counter-storytelling allows the participant to challenge the negative discourses and stereotypes held by the privileged that often plague educational institutions, and it gives a voice to marginalized populations (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano & Yasso, 2002). Qualitative researchers are interested in the beliefs and experiences from people’s perspectives (Mohajon, 2018). These stories allow marginalized groups to reveal contradictions from the dominant cultural constructions of race (Williams, 2004). Utilizing a qualitative data collection approach is appropriate for this particular study because it involves the collection of non-numerical data to be analyzed, such as interviews and experiences. The data is narrative because it presents itself primarily as words. (Mertler, 2017). Qualitative research is cyclical in nature, and its "plan, do, act" pattern is meant to be used repeatedly to reflect upon areas that can be improved in the future (Mertler, 2017). As with the continuous development of qualitative data methods, Critical Race Theory also deals with the ever-changing evolution of people and experiences and the desire to improve educational policies and beliefs.

**Planning Stage**

The planning stage of action research includes the identification of a problem, gathering information, reviewing relevant literature, and developing a research plan. Mertler (2017) stresses the importance of your topic meeting the preliminary
considerations such as personal interest in the topic, the importance of the action research study, the amount of time the study will take to complete, the difficulty of exploring the topic of interest, and the ethical considerations. The planning stage also involves understanding one’s own belief system, knowledge, and the context of potential research topic, also known as reconnaissance.

Identifying and Limiting the Topic

As a researcher, the identification of an area of interest is the simple portion of the planning process. There is a clear issue of race being a roadblock to educational success and after witnessing the impact in my own school, I knew that I wanted to research it further. The decision to narrow down the topic to relationships came from many years of meeting with Black students who did not have a connection with most of their teachers and the feeling like they didn’t belong in the environment. Understanding my philosophy as an educator regarding my values and the impact that I wanted to create with my research led my planning. The process of reconnaissance as described in Mertler (2017) provided the framework for my preliminary planning stage.

Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance involves a three-step process: self-reflection, description, and explanation. Geoffrey E. Mills (2011), a Professor of Education, author, and researcher suggests a researcher should begin by understanding the following:

1. The educational theories that impact your instructional practice.
2. The values that you hold about education.
3. Ways in which your work in schools, in general, contributes to the larger context of schooling.
4. The historical context of your school and teaching in that school and how they came to be that way.

5. The historical contexts about how and why you hold the beliefs that you do about teaching and learning

Understanding these five pieces of information will provide the groundwork for the next step of reconnaissance, which is describing the problem that you, as the researcher, would like to change. This involves the “who, what, when, where, and how” of the problem to narrow it down and provide a clear focus of the issue that the researcher would like to address. (Mertler, 2017). The final step in reconnaissance is trying to identify why the problem is occurring and formulating a hypothesis. Understanding my morals and beliefs and realizing they complement the need to fight for equity for my students and school was helpful when moving forward because I knew that I had passion behind this issue.

Gathering Information

Informal data collection was obtained throughout my years as a school counselor. This data was collected via conversations with students, teachers, and colleagues as well as through numerical data including grades, discipline reports, retention reports, college and career readiness reports. This informal data sparked an interest and it drove me to want to investigate further. I knew that I wouldn’t have access to a classroom, so I used my knowledge and previously published data to identify participants. Once I identified a narrower objective for my research, I was able to identify constraints when searching through previous studies and research.

Reviewing the Related Research
The task of researching the topic was the most time consuming, yet the most necessary when trying to focus my upcoming research efforts. Mertler (2017) stated, “A literature review allows you to use the insights and discoveries of others whose research came before yours in order to make your research more efficient and effective” (pg. 60). Locating relevant and up-to-date information involves patience and determination, but the knowledge of other’s before you is invaluable to the current research process. Utilizing empirical data is necessary because it includes well-researched articles based on a collection of data rather than the author’s opinion. The recurring themes of Black and other marginalized students being viewed in a deficit model, maintaining their educational debt in the school building, and an overall disconnect fueled my desire and quest to find solutions to the problem. The research has not changed much at all throughout the years, therefore, my selected topic is still relevant and critical.

Developing a Research Plan

Deciding on a research plan was simple because the goal of the research was to collect the data of student’s lived experiences via semi-constructed interviews and that clearly falls within the realm of qualitative data. “Qualitative research questions tend to be more open-ended and holistic in nature than quantitative research questions” (Mertler, 2017, p. 88). Asking open-ended questions allow the participant to answer in depth and possibly move in a different direction by allowing for another question to arise. Due to qualitative data being more open-ended, it is often difficult to pinpoint specific questions at first, which is why preliminary questions are often used. During the first round of questioning, I realized that my questions were too general and I improved upon them for
the second interview. This emergent phase of questioning was necessary for me as it helped me to fine tune the process of interviewing and collecting data.

**Acting Stage**

The acting stage consists of implementing the plan, collecting the data, and then analyzing the data. Prior to contacting any possible participant, I was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and it was determined that my research fell into the “exempt” category. The purpose of going through the IRB board is to ensure that the participant’s rights are protected during the research study (Mertler, 2017). My plan of identifying students who have graduated from CHS worked out well, but it was difficult to find students to follow through and answer the questions. Most of the possible participants who I contacted were interested in the subject matter, but individual schedules and conflicts seemed to get in the way. Purposeful sampling was the utilized when identifying participants. This type of sampling allows the researcher to identify and select individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Once I had a target group to contact, I sent each possible participant an email stating my research objective and what I want to accomplish from gathering data. I also stated that participation was completely voluntary and confidential. The participants were all chosen based on their shared experiences and traits. Once the initial survey was sent out, I fine-tuned the survey to allow for more detailed answers. The survey also helped me identify my interview questions for the four participants who were willing to complete another phase of data collection.

**Data Collection Strategies**
Interviews:

The interviews for this study were semi-structured with open-ended questions and they were recorded to ensure validity and accuracy. Counter-storytelling through the interviews allowed for the participant’s stories to be told while simultaneously collecting data. As one of the tenets of CRT points out, “The experiential knowledge of people of color is a legitimate way of understanding the world” (Sablan, 2018, p. 180). Each recorded interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The interviews began with a brief moment to catch up and gather any, new personal information that may be relevant and then the interview questions started. I employed a guided approach with a standardized format to ask specific questions yet allowed me to explore additional topics worth examining further. This approach allowed for the opportunity to be flexible as an interviewer (Patton, 2015). The questions and responses were manually transcribed manually and if there was any question that needed further clarification after the interview was over, a follow up conversation or email occurred. Since transcribing a conversation leaves room for error, a transcribing program was also used as backup. I interviewed the participants via phone conversations, Zoom, and emails correspondences due to many of the participants' locations and the unexpected COVID-19 guidelines.

Questionnaire:

The additional data for this qualitative study came from a survey that I created on SurveyMonkey.com. This survey was emailed it to my targeted group, which included
both closed and open-response items. I identified every Black graduate within the last five years with the exception of self-contained students and alternative program students, and I emailed my survey to them with the hope that I would get a handful of anonymous surveys returned. The survey included questions about experiences, conflicts, school culture, positive and negative situations, traits of teachers that the students had a positive experience with, feedback, and whether or not the participants had a Gullah/Geechee background. I also allowed the option to leave a comment after every question so participants could expand on their answer if necessary. The data that I collected from the survey assisted with the formulation of questions for my interviews.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

The recorded interviews were initially transcribed manually and then I used a speech to text program called Temi. As expected, there were parts of the interview that the program had a difficult time discerning, so after the transcript was downloaded, I identified areas that I had to go back to and manually transcribe word-for-word again to ensure accuracy. Once a transcript was created for each of the four interview participants, it was uploaded onto the coding program, Delve. This program allowed me to select key words and phrases and organize words and sentences into categories. The distributed survey was also analyzed for recurring themes that provided reinforcing data for the interviews. A coding scheme is the organizational step of inductive reasoning (Mertler, 2017). This method requires recognizing patterns in the collected data and grouping similar types of information together. This system of categorization allows the researcher to group similar pieces of information together. Some of the words and phrases that have been reoccurring in the study are "neglect," “ignored,” “lack of
exposure," "lack of opportunities," "African American history," "culture," and "ignorance." This process was completed by examining all of the responses to the questions and looking for recurring themes and patterns. Two types of coding were utilized during the coding process: a priori coding and grounded coding. A priori coding is appropriate because I already had an idea of the kind of data that I was looking for prior to the research and grounded coding will allow common themes and phrases to arise when the data is collected. The transcribed, reviewed, and coded data from the interviews allow common themes to emerge and become identified. Following this process, themes were organized, added, removed, expanded, and redefined until an effective list was created. Words and phrases were the units of analysis. This part of the inductive reasoning process allowed me to make connections between the data and the original research question and identify data that contradicts or conflicts with the patterns that have been discovered (Mertler, 2017; Schwalbach, 2003). Inductive reasoning was used to reduce the amount of historical data from the interview transcripts and the documents that have been collected, and it was categorized using a coding scheme (Mertler, 2017). Critical Race Theory and its five tenets served as the theoretical frame and provided the lenses to code and analyze the data.

**Student-Participants**

To ensure confidentiality and to protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were used throughout this study. A purposeful sample of participants were chosen for the interviews based on the student's background and their experiences while attending Coastal High School. The survey that I sent out to alumni was also purposeful as they met the criteria: Black, eighteen or older, and Coastal High School graduates. Purposeful
sampling selects participants who are specific individuals for whom improvement is desired. The participants were selected because they were "information-rich" and could provide the most useful and honest data possible (Tomal, 2010). Purposeful sampling is the most logical option because it allows for a small group of people who can provide a wealth of detailed information, allowing for an in-depth understanding of them and their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013; Given, 2016). Due to the participants' ages, they provided consent for themselves, and because they were no longer CHS students, district consent was not required. While the original sample of participants included a female graduate, the final selection of participants selected for the interviews were four males, all of who graduated in different years. Two of the four participants were raised in a one-parent/guardian household, one was initially raised by his grandparents and then his grandmother alone, and one was raised in a household where both parents were present. All four participants lived in a lower-income area. All four students have overcome systemic barriers, yet they persevered and attended universities. Two participants graduated from four-year universities, one of the participants has not graduated yet, and one participant completed a year of college at a university, and some classes at a local college but is not currently enrolled due to family obligations and hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3.1 This table illustrates the demographics of the interview participants.
The process of identifying participants and gathering data was complicated due to the lack of support that my school and district gave me. While the topic of race can be considered controversial, the data that I could have provided may have helped future students. However, I understood that a district with past lawsuits due to racial issues would not be welcoming additional research at this time. Since I had to use participants who were of the age of legal consent and therefore out of school, I did not have direct access to any of my participants, and scheduling meetings was often futile. Hundreds of requests for survey participation were emailed to graduates multiple times, yet I received less than thirty respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Living Arrangements</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raymond</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single-Parent Household</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Both Parents</td>
<td>Some college/workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single-Parent Household</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.1: This figure illustrates the demographics of the survey participants.

While the participation was not as plentiful as it would have been if I had access to a class of students, I received honest and candid responses from five years of graduates. I was also able to receive responses from the female perspective that I was missing from my interviews.

**Reflecting Stage**

The reflecting stage consists of two parts: sharing and communicating the results and reflecting on the process as a whole. (Mertler, 2017). This stage is crucial because there is no point in conducting research if the results are not disseminated and the researcher does not reflect on the pros, cons, setbacks, and successes. Additionally, the reflecting stage is necessary when deciding how the information gained can be shared to colleagues or other professionals who might be interested in the topic.

**Positionality and Ethical Considerations**

As a White female school counselor who has served a diverse high school population for the entirety of my career, I have realized that my position granted me the
opportunity to confront my ignorance and it helped me understand how pervasive systemic racism is to this day. It affects schools and communities and countless young lives. I began to fully realize that the curriculum that many of us were taught in a teacher education or any branch of education degree program barely scraped the surface. While classes on diversity have been implemented into degree programs, reading about issues that exist while never personally experiencing them do nothing in terms of preparing an educator to face the issues head on. Additionally, as a Northern transplant, I was thrust into a new world of language and culture that I have never experienced or learned about, and my education degree could have never prepared me for the inequities that I would be faced with in my career. While beginning this research journey, I knew that I had privilege and advantages based on my skin color and how I grew up, but I didn’t put in the work to truly investigate and understand what that meant for me until the years of research that I delved into. One person cannot change a system riddled with systemic racist policies that still favor the White locally-born population. However, I knew that at the very least, I had the opportunity to provide one more piece of research that may offer some clarity or a different perspective that may positively alter someone's thought process. I was also able to give some of the voiceless a voice through my data.

**Ethically researching an issue that directly impacts my students is of high importance.** “At a minimum level, research ethics address such values as honesty, caring, and fairness, among others” (Mertler, 2017, p. 40). Ethics and confidentiality are so intertwined in my profession as a school counselor, that it was natural to understand the importance of adhering to that standard while conducting research. Ethics plays a large
part in a research study because it is critical to protect the participants and respect their private lives.

People may interpret the concept of ethics differently based on who they are and what they believe. I connected with virtue ethics because it describes a person who has the right mixture of motivation, knowledge, and character. Virtue ethics is used when working towards social justice and equity for all people, such as the study participants. People who embody justice as a virtue are interested in understanding how to equally distribute wealth, privilege, and opportunities for all people in society (Chenneville, 2016). Ensuring equality, opportunity, and access to equitable resources are the goals I have for myself so I can help provide my students with an appropriate educational experience.

Building Trust

While other parts of the process of completing this research study presented multiple roadblocks and little opportunity for support, one of the most natural elements was the amount of trust I had earned from the students while they attended Coastal High School. I found participants who agreed to speak with me and were eager to participate in my research and thought that the topic was necessary. They were happy that I thought of them and could be part of the research that they deemed necessary. After I contacted them, the reactions I received were more than I expected, and they felt comfortable enough to be candid. While my school district experience was defeating and it almost derailed my entire research study, the participants' positive attitudes were far more rewarding and inspirational. The potential participant impacted my level of confidence with proceeding with the study and I felt the need to push through the barriers. The
participants let me into their lives and were more honest than they knew they could be while they were an underage student.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the methodology behind the qualitative research approach used when selecting my participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data through a Critical Race lens. The methodology and the lens that I viewed my data through are important because they guided me through the research process and show my passion for my participants and my commitment to their stories being heard. The study participants and ethical considerations were mentioned as well as my positionality as a researcher.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The process of data collection for this study did not come easily. Multiple roadblocks presented themselves due to the sensitive topic and the age of the potential participants. Additionally, the nature of the position I had as a researcher added a layer of difficulty. As a high school counselor, I did not have my own class that would have provided immediate access to students like teacher-researchers have. Furthermore, my school district balked at the idea of bringing racial issues to light. Once the realization that participants who were old enough to provide their own consent had to be the focus, my confidence got the boost that in needed and the study was able to continue within those parameters. Fortunately, I was successful in contacting many of my former students through the use of emails and social media. While the survey requests were sent to a fairly equal representation of students, the overwhelming majority of the respondents were females. Alternatively, the interview participants were all male despite the equal representation in the email requests. All of the interview participant request emails were sent to male and female students who I knew trusted me enough to share honest experiences, opinions, and concerns because I knew that I had built a foundation of trust and respect while they were enrolled in high school. While there were more than four alumni who agreed to be interviewed, multiple issues such as missed meetings, lack of
follow-through, and the Covid-19 pandemic stresses, forced me to drop them as potential participants. The selected interview participants resulted in an all-male participant pool and they all exemplified resilience and perseverance.

Throughout the interviews, recurring themes such as isolation, pressure, low expectations, and dual-identities emerged. Utilizing Gloria Ladson-Billings and her work in *The Dreamkeepers* as my inspiration and guide, I allowed my participants' stories to lead the research. In *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings identified the importance of teachers who implement and believe in a culturally-relevant teaching pedagogy to connect with their Black students by referencing and incorporating their students’ cultures. Ladson-Billings (2009) posits, “The primary aim of culturally-relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a ‘relevant black personality’ that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture” (p. 20). Ladson-Billings also identified the unique traits of these teachers including involvement in their schools’ community, linking the culture, beliefs, and community into the curriculum, and the belief that all students can succeed.

Data from the anonymous survey will support the themes from the interviews. General demographic information on the thirty anonymous survey participants and their comments will be presented and discussed. Following the discussion on the participants in this study, this chapter will go on to explore the counter-narratives that surfaced from the participant’s semi-structured interviews.

Relationships are a critical component of a positive learning environment and a productive school culture. While relationships are essential to all students, Black students are especially vulnerable to damaging relationships due to the overarching power,
expectations, and values of the dominant White culture (Gray, Hope, & Byrd, 2019). Black students have the ability to thrive when healthy relationships occur with their teachers (Noguera, 2003). Previous research has shown that positive relationships help support all students' adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, promote academic performance and foster students' resiliency in academic performance (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 2019) details the importance of culturally-relevant teaching and the qualities that successful teachers of this pedagogy employ in their diverse classrooms including three pillars that she has defined as: academic success, cultural competency and sociopolitical consciousness.

The participants in this study discuss their own experiences with teachers and their experiences as Black students. The final components of this chapter will review the major themes that arose during the interviews and how they substantiate the tenets of Critical Race Theory, inclusive of the beliefs that while science proves that race is not biologically factual, but socially constructed, racism is so ordinary in our culture that it seems normal; the dominant culture controls the narrative and overarching beliefs about a race, recognizing the systemic nature of racism and the danger of having a colorblind approach, recognizing the importance of people’s lived experiences through the process of storytelling, and rejecting deficit-informed research that excludes the knowledge and beliefs of marginalized populations. (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, & Ladson-Billings, 1998)
Focal Student-Participant Biographies

Julian:

Julian is a twenty-four-year-old CHS graduate who recently graduated from college up in the Northeast. Julian was raised by his grandparents in a low-income area, not too far from the school. Julian does not have a lot of information about his African American roots, so he is not certain if he has Gullah/Geechee ancestry; however, his lifestyle and language lend themselves to the Gullah/Geechee culture. Like many of the participants in this study, Julian uses local Gullah words that are very much part of a language, but most people, specifically people who are not from the areas, refer to the words as slang. One of the most common Geechee words that is used are “chillun,” which has been shortened to “churn,” and all of the participants in this study, including Julian, incorporate this word into their daily vocabulary. It is also hypothesized that he does have Gullah/Geechee ancestors due to his last name and others in the area with the same last name. Due to confidentiality, I have chosen not to disclose Julian’s last name.

Julian struggled with a broken family throughout most of his life. He didn’t have a relationship with his father and his mother was in and out of jail, so he lived with his grandparents who later separated. Julian struggled with his academics, but he made up for his academic deficits with his positive personality and charismatic nature. Julian dealt with a number of risk factors, which epidemiologists and phycologists have identified as potentially resulting in a multiplier effect on risky behavior: growing up poor, growing up in a single-parent home, and being exposed to drugs at an early age. (Noguera, 2003)

Despite an upbringing that could have conjured many negative emotions, Julian loved to talk to everyone. He was like the mayor. Julian was always smiling, always
saying hello, and always providing others support. He took on roles that most people would shy away from such as the morning announcements. Julian’s friendly and respectful demeanor afforded him the opportunities to build relationships with his teachers and the majority of them had no idea that he was struggling at home. In elementary and middle school, Julian had a difficult time reading and was academically at risk, but teachers insisted that he would be fine because he made up for his reading deficits in all other areas. His grandparents assisted Julian with his academics for as long as they could, and when they could no longer help with the content, they continued to fully support him.

In high school, Julian was one of the few Black students, specifically Black males, who took advanced placement classes and who wanted to challenge himself and excel academically. Julian struggled with having to live in two different worlds; popular, intelligent, and academic Julian at school, and just "one of the boys" who used Gullah/Geechee slang and participated in less-than-favorable activities on occasion at home. He was self-proclaimed excellent code-switcher. He is beginning his career in a different state than where he grew up, which has given him the opportunity to reflect on his culture and adolescence. Julian is motivated, intelligent, and self-aware, but he now knows that real awareness, specifically about his culture, is something that he did not have until he graduated from high school and started taking college classes. During high school, Julian was actively involved in clubs, and his outgoing personality made it easy for teachers to connect with him. He was a student who appeared to have everything going for him, but only his close friends knew the difficulties that he faced in his personal
life. Throughout Julian's entire high school career, he had one Black teacher out of the thirty-five teachers he was exposed to.

**Raymond:**

Raymond is a twenty-two-year-old male who recently graduated from college. He has also spent four years in a different state in the Northeast. While Raymond was in high school, he understood the end goal and he surrounded himself with like-minded classmates even though he sacrificed many aspects of his culture while doing so. He took many honors classes as well as AP and a few Dual Credit classes. He always challenged himself and worked hard. He participated in cross country, he was part of the National Honor Society, and he graduated with a completer cord in the health science field. During his elementary school years, Raymond attended a school that was primarily composed of Black students and his teachers were Black as well. He went to school with his Black friends, learned from his Black teachers, and went home to his Black family. Raymond didn’t know too much about his history and is unsure if he has Gullah/Geechee roots, but he shares the same last name as many students who identify as Gullah/Geechee, so one might hypothesize that he is part of the heritage. Due to confidentiality, I have chosen not to disclose Raymond’s last name. Raymond did not think about his segregated early years of education until he advanced to middle school and the experience with diversity began. Raymond grew up in a poor neighborhood and he worked hard to focus on his academics and less on athletics because he knew that his grades would be the reason he had an opportunity to get out of the Lowcountry. Throughout Raymond's entire high school career at CHS, he had one Black teacher out of the thirty-four teachers that he was exposed to.
Pete:

Pete is a twenty-year-old male who is in his junior year of college. He knows that he is of Gullah/Geechee descent but the knowledge of his culture is “diluted.” Reflecting on this topic sparked a curiosity to learn more about his past. While Pete didn’t necessarily embody the Gullah/Geechee heritage, he had many friends who were deeply rooted in those communities. He had to employ a dual-identity approach and he understood the necessity to codeswitch on many occasions. Pete found himself in a few potentially-dangerous situations while trying to help community friends who were not on the same path as he was. He wanted to be a good influence on and save them from the streets, but knew he could only do so much. Pete began his high school career taking all college preparatory (CP) classes and gradually moved up to honors, AP and Dual Credit as the years progressed. Pete finished high school with over a 4.3 GPA. He was a member of an all-Black male character-building group. This group was spearheaded by one of the only Black male employees in the building, a member of the support staff and not a teacher. Pete wanted to be in the group to have some connection to his “blackness” because he didn’t have any other mentors during school. Throughout Pete’s entire high school career, he had one Black teacher out of the thirty-four teachers he was exposed to.

Warren:

Warren is a twenty-year-old male who began his college career excited to attend a college in a different state that had a great band program, but unfortunately found himself in an unpleasant environment where he was not successful. He was led to believe that he would be in a certain program, but found himself placed in a different program once he arrived. He described feelings of being targeted by White teachers and quickly realized
he was normally the only Black student or one of the few Black students in class. He felt unwelcomed and out of place academically and those feelings led to an ultimate departure from the college. The university’s website states that about 10 percent of its student body is Black/African American, which supports a reason behind Warren’s feelings of discomfort. Warren has a rich Gullah/Geechee background in his family. He is a descendent of Gullah ancestors who have been in the Lowcountry for hundreds of years.

Warren should be in his junior year of college. He was a solid student in high school and finished strong with over a 3.7 GPA. Warren mainly took college preparatory classes and he was actively involved in band and JROTC. Warren utilized his artistic expression and music to get through the difficult times of his personal life outside of high school. While Warren is thankful that he has a supportive and loving family, he lived in a low-income neighborhood and was frequently forced to physically defend himself or tolerate physical harm from other teenagers who he didn’t fit in with because he did not act like them. While Warren hid the encounters from everyone, he still came to school and tried to be a young man of character. Throughout Warren's high school career, he had two Black teachers out of the thirty-three that he was exposed to.

**General Demographic Information from the Survey Respondents**

The thirty anonymous survey participants were composed of students from the graduating classes of 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. The survey requests were sent to all graduates from each of the previously stated graduation years with the exception of students in alternate program schools and self-contained special education students. As expected, approximately 10-15% of the emails were no longer valid and bounced back to
my email. The emails were sent to both male and female students and while historically, female students account for a slightly higher enrollment percentage, the difference is only by a few percentage points. Due to the demographic makeup of the survey requests, it was surprising that the majority of respondents who completed the survey were female. 78.3% identified as female, 23.3% identified as male, and 3.3% chose not to answer. 63.3% identified as Gullah/Geechee while 16.7% were unsure, and 16.7% stated that they were not part of the culture. There was also a good mixture of graduate who have gone to or are still attending two-year and four-year universities as well as graduates who went straight into the military or workforce. Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 provide a visual representation of the demographic information.

Figure 4.1: Participant’s gender          Figure 4.2: Participant’s Gullah/Geechee roots
Throughout the transcription and coding process, there were many similarities between the experiences. I identified four themes that surfaced and I believe to be meaningful: Isolation, pressure, low expectations, and dual-identity. The words from the students will be presented throughout this analysis in addition to supporting comments from the students from my anonymous survey when applicable.

Isolation:

During each conversation with the participants, the feeling of isolation and feeling out-of-place presented itself, specifically when referencing any upper-level class that they were enrolled in. Julian, Pete, and Raymond all felt isolated as one of the few, if only, Black students in their upper-level classes. Pete said, "You become like a recluse in a social sense." Raymond also shared the same sentiment. While it didn’t necessarily bother Raymond at the time, now that he is detached from that stage in his life, he can reflect. He said,

I felt isolated and lost and like I couldn't connect with anyone. I wish that I could have gone back to the beginning of high school and made more friends that were
students of color, but I realized that they were on a different track than me and I was going to be with White students in my classes from then on.

While Warren felt a different type of isolation, he said that he learned from it and tries to put it behind him. Warren didn’t feel isolated because he was one of the few Black students in a class because he did not take many upper level classes and college preparatory (CP) classes are very integrated. Warren’s sense of isolation came from the understanding that he was different from the other Black students in school and the Black kids in his neighborhood. He said,

I feel like my social status played more of an effect to my experience at that school. It was like, I was one of those kids who didn't really fit in. I wasn't trying to fit in. I was trying to be me, but at the end of the day, like it's still affecting me at home.

Warren buried his head in his music and embraced the fact that he didn’t fit in, but he realized that it came at a cost. He would frequently be “ganged” or “boxed” when he got off the bus by neighborhood kids because they felt like he didn’t fit in and he was too “White.” He had to hide the almost daily physical and emotionally-draining interactions from his family, his teachers, and his group of friends in school. He did not feel like he could tell anyone because he didn’t want his family to know and potentially put themselves in a dangerous situation. Once he graduated and thought that those issues would dissipate, he found himself isolated academically and racially at his university and those feelings contributed to Warren ultimately transferring out of the school.
Pressure:

Multiple forms of pressure seemed to be present for my participants. The pressure to succeed as well as the pressure to retain their identity, while also not being stereotyped. The pressure to succeed is multifaceted; it comes from teachers, comes from the home, and comes from within. The pressure to not be the "typical Black kid" in class, as Pete stated. The pressure to surpass your older family members' success with the hope of providing a better life in the future and the pressure to not let anyone down. Pete said, “When I formed connections with a few of my teachers, it was because they were interested in how my mind worked, and I wasn't just some 'regular black kid.'" Julian was also aware of the pressure. He said, "Being a smart Black kid is hard. You want to be successful and advance in life, but I also wanted to remain loyal and try not to seem better than any of my childhood friends." Julian shared Ladson-Billings' (1994) sentiment when she stated the importance of students "developing a 'relevant black personality' that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture" (p. 17). Julian also shared that the pressure and expectations that he had for himself to succeed finally caught up to him during his senior year of high school. He said, “I had so much on my plate to the point that it affected my physical health. Everything came crashing down. I thought panic attacks were only for the weak.” Warren’s feeling of pressure comes from pursuing his musical passion while staying true to himself and his feelings. He desperately wanted to succeed in his college classes, but the discomfort and the pressure of trying to fit in with the majority of the White students did not turn out the way that he wanted. Warren did not feel smart or
talented enough. Warren also felt the pressure of being a role model for his younger brother and refusing to allow him to experience the same struggles.

**Low Expectations**

The stereotype that all Black students are academically behind is emotionally damaging for the Black students. (Baker, 2017; Burton, Hampton-Garland, & Mizelle-Johnson, 2017) Pete said,

In high school, there were some teachers who would test my intelligence… like, let's see if this kid is smart enough. I can be just as smart, if not smarter than the other kids, but it felt like they (the teachers) were coming for me. Like, I would get called on more times and the class would get quieter, like the pressure was on and if you slip up, you were going to be that dumb black boy. It was very uncomfortable for me. You get to the point where you feel like you're walking on eggshells, so you don't say much.

Stereotypes and microaggressions such as these are prominent in the educational system, and key components of Ladson-Billings’ work on the five tenets of CRT. Teachers continue to have low expectations and students of color withdraw from class activities or act out, and this unproductive behavior leads to poor academic performance. Teachers then see the results and continue to view students of color as having deficits and needing to catch up (Burton, Hampton-Garland, & Mizelle-Johnson, 2017).

One of the survey participants from 2016 shared a poignant statement when she said, “It kinda felt like some teachers were lenient just because I was Black, like I needed them to be so merciful.” Alternately, teachers can have a memorable and positive impact on students if they are willing to form genuine and caring relationships. (Rudasill, Reio,
Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). Another survey participant from the class of 2016 fondly remembered the impact of one of her teachers. She said,

Ms. Sherry [pseudonym] was the most amazing teacher ever. She was patient, thorough, and attentive. She listened to what her students wanted as human beings and as teenagers. She advocated for us when we didn’t understand something. She always went the extra mile and connected with her students. She was the one teacher who you came home talking about. She built relationships with us all and even after she left to go to a different state, she stayed in contact!

Julian understood the feeling of low expectations and fondly remembered the teachers that did not allow him to feel like he could fail. He said,

Mr. Brown [pseudonym] pushed me and set reasonable goals. He gave me soft deadlines so I could reach my hard deadlines because I had some room to fall behind. He also gave me one of his own books that helped me research colleges. Also, Mr. Smith [pseudonym] pushed me to be my best self and he didn’t treat me like a kid. However, he still recognized that I was a kid at the same time and encouraged me to practice self-care when I was close to my breaking point.

Mr. Brown epitomized the ideology of culturally relevant teaching by understanding that Julian needed assistance due to his home life, caring for him, and pushing him to realize his potential. (Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010)

**Dual Identities**

One of the most significant themes that I discovered through the interview process was how pervasive the feeling of Black students having to act two different ways depending on the situation and environment was. Whether it was trying to fit in with
their friends or trying to fit into a setting with mostly White students, the participants in this study were constantly being pulled in two directions. Julian said, “I’m sure most people can relate to the fact that you do things out of your character to fit in.” Even though Julian was involved in many extracurricular activities and was doing well academically, when he went home he was “just like every other Geechee delinquent from the Lowcountry. Maybe there was a part of me who enjoyed that reckless lifestyle or maybe I just wanted to prove that I was still like them, that I was normal.” While Raymond hasn’t necessarily changed who he is, he understands that he feels the need to act different around different groups of people. He said, “During my internship when I was the only Black student, I had to watch the way that I spoke and presented myself because I had to worry if expressing my opinion would make me seem aggressive or angry.” Similarly, one survey participant from the class of 2016 stated, “I had to code switch in different settings when necessary. I would have to tone down my language/dialect in order not to seem hostile.” Raymond has also found himself at a diverse university where there are Black students who are from Africa and he realized that he is different from them as well. He would have to tell people that he’s African American, but not from Africa. It enhanced the feeling of not fitting in. The term “double consciousness” was first coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1897 and published in his book, The Souls of Black Folk in 1903 and almost 120 years later, the same feelings of having to live as two people in one country can be seen in my participants and many other Black citizens.
Individual Narratives/Counter-Storytelling

Julian:

Julian was passionate when speaking about his past and the barriers that he had growing up that put him in the “at-risk” category. He didn’t have a father around and his mother was in and out of jail, so he was raised by his grandparents for the majority of his life. He kept his home life struggles to himself and he says that he “busted my ass in school with the hopes that my mom would be proud enough to stop breaking the law and be home with her kids.” Julian was also eager to share his views on the education system and how frustrated he was. He said,

I knew Black history was always devalued within America’s Westernized educational system, but damn, I was frustrated that I didn’t know about my history until college. I was furious. I wasn’t even mad at the fact that I didn’t know, I was mad at the fact that it felt as though it was purposefully not taught to me.

Julian also said,

I get it. South Carolina is ranked forty-fifth (at the time of this conversation) in the nation for their K-12 education, but I realized that I only knew about certain key events and people like Barack Obama, the Civil Rights movement, and Harriet Tubman. There was no way that I can get into a great college and be so ignorant about my own culture by coincidence.

Julian is aware of the cultural barriers that exist in education and the struggles that Black students have to face throughout their lives, yet he also knows that Black people are strong enough to break the barriers. He says,
I had all of the ingredients to be a bad student. I was around drugs and gang activity from a young age. I knew that I didn't want that for my life, but I also wanted to remain loyal to the people who have been around me my whole life. Julian is aware that he had to become two different people and he even mentioned code-switching. He said,

There were two sides to me, but my core was the same. I had to leave my all-Black neighborhood where I spoke a certain way, and I went to a diverse, high school where I had to change the way that I talked, but I never saw it as a burden."

Julian mentioned that his code-switching might have been easier for him because he grew up with his White grandmother and Black grandfather. He was able to adapt and he had a “decent White person voice” and he wore sweater vests while being “one of two Black kids in my AP classes,” but on the other hand he “felt more at home at a soulful cookout and making raps with my homies.” Julian said,

In school, I was able to code-shift easily between the hood dudes in the back of the cafeteria and my Drama Studio classmates who lived in the nice neighborhoods. It’s like speaking two different languages, but I never felt like my authentic self. I could take the AP classes that none of my friends were in and then go home and be like every other Geechee delinquent from the Lowcountry.”

Even though Julian is not exactly sure of his culture and whether or not he was a descendent of the Gullah/Geechee bloodline, he grew up around the culture and that was the way that his friend group acted.
When we discussed the experiences that he had within his classrooms and with his teachers, he was understanding of the barriers.

I picked up on the energy from the teachers. I knew who cared. Some teachers had great intentions, but there were zero platforms to learn more about myself and my history. I had to wait until college to have any kind of self-discovery.

When I asked what can be done to help other students in that process, Julian said, "There can be some intentionality with the resources and lessons. Something that can spark the conversation about race or to see some representation of Black people." Julian credits his success to his difficult background, his supportive grandmother and family, and to certain teachers who knew he was great and pushed him to places he never thought he would go. His grandparents would sit him down at the table and monitor his homework completion while they were still able to help. The few teachers that truly helped Julian were “willing to put in the effort because they saw that I was too.” Julian’s favorite teacher also became his greatest mentor. He said,

He wanted me to be my best self and encouraged me to push myself. I looked up to him because he was authentic. He was weird, compassionate, blunt, and he didn’t care who liked him.

Julian knew that it took a team to get him to where he is now. His English teacher reviewed his college essays, his school counselor kept him up-to-date with all of the scholarships, two of his teachers gave him strong letters of recommendation, and another teacher linked their Google calendars together to stay on top of the college deadlines, gave him a book on colleges around the country and encouraged him to apply to the college he went to.
Raymond:

Raymond had a unique start to his education, an elementary school that was "99 percent all Black from the students to the teachers.” This hyper-segregation was due to the segregated neighborhood that he lived in (Orfield and Frankenberg, 2008).” Raymond said,

I didn't know anything different. Everyone looked like me, and we took field trips to places to discuss our history. We went to the plantations and actually spent time in the slave quarters, which made the experience feel real. Things were hands-on, and I have never forgotten those experiences. I actually still talk to one of my teachers to this day! Once Raymond moved on to middle school, the population started to get a little more diverse and he thought, “Oh, this is cool! I get to see everybody!"

Starting high school at CHS was even more of a shock to Raymond. "CHS was very diverse except for AP and honors classes. There were barely any African Americans in those classes and I quickly realized that most of my friends were going to be White." I asked Raymond how he felt that his teachers supported him or didn’t support him and he said,

I feel like my teachers supported me because I was so different than what the typical Black kid is looked at like. I wanted to learn and I feel like the teachers put much more energy in me because they wanted to help me be successful. I wish that all students of color are given that much attention and that people of color in higher level classes aren’t look at as different and special, but as a normal, smart, Black person.
Raymond also said,

There is diversity at CHS and even at my university, but it's not integrated. It's like “fake diversity.” In high school, African American history was glazed over, and there wasn't much time spent on the topic. It was the same as Native American history. The past was discussed, and it was "like, yup, this happened; next!"

When I asked Raymond about the diversity of his teachers, he said,

They were pretty much all White and it wasn't bothersome at the time. I was more interested on how they were delivering the content but now that I think back, it would have been nice to have more people who thought like me.

Raymond must have reflected on our discussion about education because he sent me an email, and he went on to say:

As much as I know my teachers listened to and helped me so much at every step, if you want more students of color, there needs to be more visibility and role models in different spaces of the school. I did not have a single teacher of color teaching my advanced classes. One total all of high school. To get more students of color into honors/AP classes at CHS, they need to let instructors of color teach some of those courses! Having people who look like you makes a huge difference in regards to performance, motivation, support, resources, and navigating the world in general. It did not hit me that that was something I was missing until college where I met my now professional mentor, Dr. V. Richardson [pseudonym]. I want to be her when I grow up! She is a nursing professor of color. She advocates and helps ALL of her students but she goes ABOVE and
BEYOND for her students of color because we do not always get the same opportunities as White students. She makes her students of color feel seen and acknowledged in spaces where we are not the majority and not always treated fairly. She makes herself available, she stays late, she makes connections and presents them to students so that we can have as many opportunities as we can.

I also asked Raymond about other factors in his life that pushed him to succeed and break the barriers. Raymond said that he credits his strong and supportive mother. He said, “I really appreciate the support that my mother gave me. She could have easily told me to go to college locally so I could stay close to her, but she gave me the freedom to leave the state and explore. She wanted me to have as many options and experiences as possible. I would still be stuck in the Lowcountry if she wanted to be like most of the other mothers that I know. She had to be selfless and I’m so thankful for that.”

Warren:

While speaking to Warren, I realized that I was ignorant as to how difficult his life was during high school because he kept it secret. I asked him to elaborate on what he meant when he told me how hard life was. He said, “I had to learn how to defend myself from something that affected me mentally and physically every day. There were some rough guys in my neighborhood who I didn’t fit in with.” He began to say something else and then stopped and asked me if he could be completely honest most likely because he thought I would be offended, and I said, yes, of course.
He went on to say,

I had a lack of respect from my community. They thought I was too
“whitewashed.” I didn’t fit in. I was into my grades and music and the pressure
of not failing at those things and they didn’t like that I guess. Every day I would
get off the bus and get ganged (beat up) by a few kids. It really affected me in life
and I kept it a secret because I didn’t want my family to know. They worked a lot
and I got very good at hiding any physical marks.

In the *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) shares the uncomfortable realization that
many Black children are faced with. She said, “Somehow, many have come to equate
exemplary performance in school with a loss of their African American identity, that is,
doing well in school is seen as ‘acting White’” (p. 12). Warren’s neighborhood bullies
perceived him as trying to act White and they resented him for that and ultimately, made
him suffer for believe that he “sold out.” (Noguera, 2003). Fortunately, Warren did not
compromise who he was, but many are not able to fight such a strong perception. While
Warren may not have gone to an adult out of fear of repercussions, he acknowledged that
it would have been nice to have a trusted adult in the school building. Despite his
inability to see his strength at the time, he acknowledged that it helped create the man he
is today. He said, “I decided that I needed to learn how to protect myself. I started to
take all kinds of martial arts which helped me mentally and physically.” Warren thought
that he had a way out of his city by getting a scholarship to an out-of-state school. I
recalled seeing him visit CHS after his first year of college and that he said he was
coming back to the Lowcountry. I decided to ask him about that experience and he said
that he never brought it up and he said that he felt like the teachers were out to get him. While these teachers were not at the high school level, I decided to probe a little further. Warren said,

Like, in all of my music classes (his major), every single one of them (the students), I only counted three, if not two black students in there. It was me and like another girl and another guy. And we were always the ones that were together and we all failed and I ain't gonna lie, we all did. No matter how hard we practiced, no matter how much we grinded, we all failed.

I asked him if he felt the same way with his high school teachers and fortunately, he didn’t. He felt that he was too quiet and in the background that he was probably ignored especially since he didn’t cause any trouble. He said,

It's not that the teachers were bad per se. Like I said, I don't recall having any bad experiences. It's just that… it was just the classes. It was the way the atmosphere was, I guess. Yeah. It seemed like they never really cared. Some of them never cared. There were some great teachers, but it seemed like some of them didn’t care and didn’t want to be there.

While Warren wasn’t in the top of his class, he did well enough to get into college, although, by what the experience sounded like, it seemed like he felt like he didn’t belong there and he only received a scholarship because of his color. His musical talent was never explored or enhanced and he realized he would thrive elsewhere. I also asked Warren if he had any favorite teachers or role models while he was at CHS.
He said,

God rest his soul. Mr. Sully [pseudonym]. He was the best. He knew how to be the leader. He taught me everything I needed to know. He helped me get rid of my ego. You could tell, by the way he lived like every day at his job. He actually cared about all of us. If we had any concerns, he was there. He would go out of his way to do whatever he could to make sure we were all taken care of. Mr. Lang [pseudonym] was another one. They were always at the school. They were part of the community and you could really tell that they loved their job and their students and the community.

I also asked Warren if he had any positive relationships outside of school that helped him through high school, especially since he was physically and emotionally hurt by the neighborhood kids almost daily. He says,

My family is great. My pops is my stepfather, but I call him my pops because I consider him my father. He's like, he's my rock. Like if I ever need advice, I go to him, he'll give it to me straight and my mother she's always been there for me. I grew up with her most of the time but she was in the army. She was in the national guard, but she was still there for me at the end of the day.

While Warren in currently not attending college because he is helping his younger sibling with his online schooling because of COVID-19, he wants to go back. He’s pursuing his music and artistic passion at the moment.

Pete:

During high school, Pete was driven, yet quiet. He frequently found himself in a mentor position for acquaintances or neighborhood friends who had gone down the
wrong path. He felt the need to save everyone and not let them succumb to the criminal justice system. He decided that he had to walk away from a few relationships when he found himself in the middle of confrontations of others similarly to Julian. Also, like Julian, Pete expressed a similar passion about his history and the absence of information while in high school. He ended up majoring in political science with an emphasis on economics. While catching up on what life has been like after high school, I asked Pete how high school prepared him for the college world. Pete says, “Well, I was used to being one of the only Black faces in my honors and AP classes and that translated to my classes at Clemson. I might not have been as prepared if I wasn’t already used to it.” I asked Pete how it felt being one of the only black students in class. Pete said,

It was very uncomfortable for me. I feel like my intelligence was always being tested to see if I was smart enough and belonged there and I got that in college too. You always feel like you have to prove yourself because you don’t want to be viewed as the “dumb black boy.”

Pete’s confirmation of the pressure in class resonates with the other participants who I interviewed. “A lot of kids struggle.” When I asked about the possible reasons for Black students struggling, Pete said,

There were only a handful of teachers that I can say actually cared and you were one of them. You didn’t have to do anything, but it was helpful because you listened to me, you supported me, and you reaffirmed my confidence. That wasn't really the culture of CHS. When I found that when I was connecting with
teachers, it was mostly because of my work, how my mind worked and how I participated in class. I wasn’t just some regular Black kid.

I noticed that on many occasions, Pete mentioned not being a “typical Black kid” and I asked him more about his experience with teachers and the overall curriculum and he said,

You can tell that some teachers were completely disconnected and didn’t care.

When you have that inherent bias, it needs to be broken down, but how can that happen when every single thing that we learn about being Black feels negative.

I asked Pete to elaborate a little more on what it meant to feel like you are thought of as a “typical Black kid” and what that meant and he said,

There are inherent stigmas of people, you know? People just know what they are taught. In high school, there were some teachers who would test my intelligence... like, let's see if this kid is smart enough. I can be just as smart, if not smarter than the other kids, but it felt like they (the teachers) were coming for me. I would get called on more times and the class would get quieter, like the pressure was on and if you slip up, you were going to be that dumb black boy. It was very uncomfortable for me. You don't know who is really there for you or to help you or if they are just there to perpetrate this stigma of Black kids.

I asked Pete what that pressure felt like for him and how is affected him and potentially other Black students as well. He said,

“You become like a recluse in a social sense. For me, my work showed for itself, but for a lot of kids, they struggle and do poorly. One of my friends came to me and said, you know I can't deal, the pressure is always on, I kinda want to go back
to honors. These kids were in the same classes as me in middle school, but then in high school, they kinda died off and their attention was diverted elsewhere like athletics.

I asked Pete about his teachers and his relationships with them and he reiterated that a handful of them truly cared in his opinion. He said, “When I formed connections with a few of my teachers, I felt it was only because of how my mind worked.” I also asked Pete how he dealt with these feelings and he said,

At CHS, there were a select handful of teachers who really cared. Had it not been for you helping me and talking to me through the process, I don't know where I would be. I was able to talk to you and work through my thoughts and decisions. You didn't have to tell me what to do, but your affirmation gave me confidence. Also, the lack of anything Black that represents you made me want to join extracurriculars like certain clubs and get involved in mentorship and Black History month.

When I asked Pete to describe the qualities of some of his favorite teachers, he said, “I was the type of student who showed that I cared and the teachers recognized that.” He recalled four of his teachers who shared similar qualities. Pete said,

Ms. Martin, Mr. Mack, Ms. Brown, and Ms. Melvin [all pseudonyms] were very nice and helpful with the material they taught in class. They would routinely stay behind and help a student who was struggling with the material. They could tell that I cared a lot and they connected me to resources outside and inside of the classroom. For example, Ms. Brown was intrigued by the way that I thought and she introduced me to a website she believed would interest me
Critical Race Theory Analysis

The five tenets of Critical Race Theory allow the past analysis and interpretation of struggles to interweave with the participants' present struggles in this research study. Prior research assists the reader in understanding the depth behind each of the participants' voices.

Tenet #1: Racism is Ordinary in Society

The effects of the systemic beliefs that Black people are inferior infiltrate the educational system. Ladson-Billings (1998) stresses that racism is so common in our society that it feels normal, thus making it necessary to expose the harsh realities. Black students carry the burden of being labeled and stereotyped before they even step foot in their school because of their race and how they are portrayed in the media (Price, 2016). All of the participants in this study felt that they were targeted or stereotyped in school at one time or another due to their race. Pete stated that one of the hardest things to hear was when he received a backhanded compliment that "I was the smartest Black person in the school and the class. It wasn't that I was the smartest person, but it was like they were shocked that I was Black AND smart." Pete also experienced hearing comments such as his blackness was the only reason he was receiving something for advancing academically. He said that he decided to take his anger and create a conversation instead. He asked the student about the comment and he actually realized that his mindset was what he was taught and he actually believed it and it wasn’t meant to be hurtful. Pete found the opportunity to create a conversation to try and remedy some of the ignorance. One survey participant from the class of 2016 had a similar experience. She said,
At one point, a teacher made a comment that Black kids came to school for all the wrong reasons. They also told me that I was the smartest Black student in my school, and I just felt like it undermined the potential of the other Black students in the school. One of the survey participants from the class of 2018 remembers a remark from an elementary school teacher that has stuck with her throughout middle school and high school. She said, “My teacher told me in front of my class that the only reason I was at this school was to help the diversity.”

The participants in this study had a common link; they were all self-motivated and understood their self-worth enough to brush off their classmates' ignorance and stereotypical remarks. Pete and Warren both said, "They knew that they could get away with saying stuff/racist things." The personalities that the participants have are non-confrontational and even-keeled. Pete elaborated by saying, "People in my class would have never said certain things in front of some of my other friends because they would have never gotten away with it." Pete meant that his classmates knew that they could say racist things, and Pete was not the type of person who would engage in a physical altercation. When asked if a teacher stepped in to refute ignorant remarks, Raymond and Pete said that "they would mostly act like they didn't hear it" or "they would say, 'that's enough' and move on to change the subject." That sentiment was echoed with a comment from a survey response from a student from the class of 2018. She said, “There was one time in my English class when we were reading a book out loud and it had a word in it that a White person should not say. The teacher said the word out loud without any hesitation. I was highly disappointed.”
Ladson-Billings (1994) mentions that culturally-relevant teachers question the racism, the structural inequalities, and injustices in society, and they not only discuss these topics, but they also promote action and challenge the system. If the participants had a culturally-relevant teacher as their ally, the teacher would have stepped into the conversation occurring in the classroom and acted to dispel the ignorant comments and also would not use harmful words. Another class of 2016 survey participant stated,

I believe that teachers should be held accountable for their negative racial beliefs!
It’s always the teachers’ word over the students. Things should be investigated.

When the district or principal decides to come in the classroom to watch the teacher and how they interact with their classroom, the teacher often turns into a whole different person.

**Tenet #2: Interest Convergence or Material Determinism**

The belief that White people will only seek equality and justice when they can benefit from it stems from past experiences and policies such as affirmative action. Under the guise of equality, a law was created to make it illegal to deny someone employment based on race or religion; however, an amendment was later added to include women. The inclusion of women benefitted White women and, therefore, White families. This little-known fact is not discussed in textbooks, so when affirmative action was mentioned in a history class, Pete was not surprised that a White classmate told him that "affirmative action made it possible for you to go to college," and they "completely disregarded my intelligence and capabilities."

Additionally, while the federal and state-level education systems are fully aware of the country's changing demographics, the curriculum, testing, and teacher-training
programs are still created for the average white middle-class student. Ladson-Billings (1994) clearly stated her suggestions for improving instruction for Black students, which included recruiting teachers interested in working with Black students, providing cultural experiences and education to teachers to create a space to examine one's own culture as well as other cultures, requiring prolonged immersion in Black culture, extended and more controlled student-teaching experiences, and opportunities to observe culturally-relevant classrooms and teaching. (pp. 131-136) Teacher-preparation programs have remained mostly unchanged. (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) One survey participant from the class of 2018 states, “Make sure that the teachers release their bias against the students who do not look like them before they become teachers.” Any initiative regarding race or culture that begins in a school seems to be positive, but the reality of the initiative becoming a checkmark instead of the passion for educators to change the inequities in the system quickly dissipate.

**Tenet #3: Race as a Social Construct**

While race is not a scientific reality, and all people are classified as human beings, humans have used differences such as hair type and eye color to create a hierarchy and empowerment of White traits. Pete was well-aware of this reality and said,

Unfortunately, race is a defining part of your character for some people, so I kinda have a barrier up when it comes to that. If I noticed that teachers would say certain things that would bother me about race, I was like, ok, well, that's how you are and thank you for telling the truth. Now I know not to come to you for help or anything like that.
Critical Race Theory recognizes that race is a social construct and destructive to the marginalized populations. Teachers are reluctant to point out race because it's an uncomfortable topic; however, "attempts at colorblindness masks a 'dysconscious racism,' an 'uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 31-32). Julian brought this idea up during our interview. He was very aware that people in the Lowcountry are nice and it seems like everyone likes or at least tolerates each other fairly well, however, “White people know that they have the power here and as long as the Black people know their place, then everything will continue on just fine.” Julian was my first interview and that comment really made me start thinking about the culture here in the Lowcountry. I know that this sentiment is probably felt in many places in the country, but the prevalence of the feeling of having a position in society beneath White people must be a little more painful when one is regularly around reminders of slavery. Plantations, street names, and statues that remind a person of their ancestors who were forcibly brought to this country and walked on the same land that they are standing on must be difficult to think about. As a White person who is not a local, it was hard to not feel an extreme sense of sadness at the thought of having a “place” as a second-class citizen is still a common feeling with our youth. Race is absolutely still a prevalent social construct in the Lowcountry of South Carolina

Tenet #4: Voice or Counter-Narrative

Telling a story from a different viewpoint is an approach when trying to spark growth within people. However, while it may be helpful for a Black student to tell a story in class, the desire to fit in and not cause any disturbances creates difficult situations. Pete
stated, "You get to the point where you feel like you're walking on eggshells, so you don't say much." Ladson-Billings (1994) stressed the importance of incorporating and legitimizing students' real-life experiences as they become part of the "official" curriculum. Respecting the students' home culture and including positive examples of Black culture can create an inviting classroom environment that promotes conversation and sharing because typically, the "historical, cultural, and scientific contributions of African Americans are ignored or rendered trivial" (p. 138). One of the survey participants from the class of 2018 said, “Allow kids from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to actually learn about their culture without it being ‘dumbed down.’” The curriculum has the ability to provide a sense of belonging to the students who are most often left out of it. The curriculum and the teacher’s instruction can either assuage or exacerbate a student’s feeling of belonging. (Gray, et al., 2019) Almost all of the participants in this study would like to see more Black culture and specifically, the Gullah/Geechee culture in the curriculum. Warren stated, “I don’t know why the district doesn’t teach any form of the Gullah/Geechee or tells anyone about that part of the culture especially since half of your community is part of it.” The results from the anonymous survey also show that the survey participants agree with that sentiment. Figure 4.4 provides a visual representation of how the students feel about the Gullah/Geechee culture being part of the curriculum.
Figure 4.4: Importance of Gullah/Geechee curriculum

As figure 4.2 previously displayed, the majority of the participants state that they have Gullah/Geechee roots. What I have learned during my research is that many people do not know their history and that is likely where the 20% “Unsure” answers come from. This lack of knowledge may be due to ancestors purposely straying from the culture because it was either looked down upon, ancestors dying or moving away from family members and never had the chance to pass down their history, or it could even be from older generations keeping the information to themselves as Warren pointed out. Warren is fortunate enough to know that he is of Gullah/Geechee descent, but he stated, “The older generation in my family doesn’t like to teach it to anyone who comes down here and the younger generations are like, why? I personally don’t see an issue with it.” Perhaps the younger generations feel differently because pride in the Gullah heritage and language appears to be spreading among the young people on the sea islands. The use of Gullah/Geechee language was looked down upon for many years and thought of as a mark of low-status and ignorance. Many people, including educators, thought of the language as substandard and broken English and children were forced to give it up to speak “standard English.” (National Park Service, 2005). This may be the reason for one of the class of 2015 survey participants stating that a Gullah/Geechee class option should
be offered for people of that culture, but some non-Black families would not want their children to learn about it.

**Tenet #5: Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism**

The learned beliefs that all people in a race behave the same way, enjoy the same things, and experience the same struggles are stereotypes that strip people's individuality. Pete was always aware that he might be viewed as "just another dumb Black boy." Pete was also conscious that "there are inherent stigmas of people. People just know what they are taught." According to the participants, there are very few teachers who would approach the topic of race. Raymond said, "White students are not interested in learning about racism and it's hard for a teacher to facilitate that kind of conversation. The teachers know their audience is not interested." Julian also mentioned that "Even the Black teachers don't approach the topic." Julian also expressed that he was upset that he didn’t learn anything about his culture until college. When stereotypes are never questioned or discussed, it leaves little room for those who believe them to be challenged and educated about the damage those stereotypes have on individual people and groups. Raymond mentioned the understanding that everyone who is Black is thought of in the same way. He said, “I do notice this stereotype, like when I walk down the street and a White lady holds her purse tighter or when I get followed around in the store.” One of the survey participants from the class of 2017 said, “During an argument, one of my teachers said ‘your type of people’ and I was heated.” Another reality is that the culture of the area is not taught in school. Black history education is concentrated during the month of February during Black History Month and it is occasionally mentioned in lessons throughout the year, but many of the students in the Lowcountry area have a
unique culture that is not “just Black” to them. The intricacies of the Gullah/Geechee culture and the influence that still remains in the Lowcountry is different that Black Americans in other parts of the country. Not one of the interview or survey participants had any education about their culture in school. In fact, many people including myself as the researcher in this study, have to educate themselves about the culture because no one has ever taught us either. None of the participants in this study received any education on the Gullah/Geechee culture outside of their own families. Warren has the most knowledge out of any of the participants. As Warren pointed out, “It’s not even just a language. It’s a whole unit. A whole community. It’s not even a race, I don’t know, it’s hard to describe.”

Educators have the unique ability to create significant change in the way their students think, understand, and behave. In The Dreamkeepers, Ladson-Billings (2009) points out that the culturally-relevant teachers in her research viewed education and knowledge as vehicles for emancipation and they consistently found ways to incorporate Black history and differing viewpoints into the class discussions. Educators have the chance to create a classroom community that is inclusive, empathetic, and knowledgeable by utilizing the information and ideas from the five tenets of Critical Race Theory.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The driving force behind this action research study was to gain a general understanding of Black students' perceptions of and personal experiences of White teachers and the current educational system while exploring the benefits of teachers utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. The overall goal was to address the following questions:

1. How do recent Black graduates describe the impact of their relationships with White teachers and how did those relationships impact the student academically, socially, and emotionally?

2. Do recent Black high school graduates at a southeastern suburban high school perceive a correlation between positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) and an equitable positive school culture that utilizes a culturally relevant pedagogy within its classrooms on Black student’s success?

3. What classroom strategies employed by White educators have a perceived effect on the culturally diverse student population at the southeastern urban high school in this study?

4. Who or what do successful Black students attribute their successes to when there is an absence of meaningful educational relationships?
The research questions were explored using a qualitative research method approach and by utilizing counter-storytelling to gain insight into the lived experiences of five Black former students at CHS. The data was then analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

**Summary of Research Findings**

While all five participants were unique and attended CHS at different times, their stories and experiences were strikingly similar. The five tenets of CRT were present and brought to life through their words while discussing stories that highlighted the normalcy of being tested and oftentimes viewed as inferior in the classroom, the stereotyping, the colorblind-approach that teachers would adopt, and the lack of cultural representation. The feelings of being underestimated were present in all conversations and the feelings of being targeted were present within a few of the stories from the male participants. All of the participants were motivated to succeed and knew the importance of challenging themselves with higher level classes, even if that meant being one of the only Black students in the classroom. The participants were all aware that the topic of race was avoided or ignored by teachers, but no one was willing to take the chance of being the center of attention by calling out racist behavior or insensitive comments. They all accepted the fact that people were ignorant and it was not worth their energy to fight it at the time. All of the participants were cognizant of the Lowcountry being a racially-tense area and few were lucky enough to experience other areas of the country and all of the participants were hopeful that there can be positive change in the educational system, yet they didn’t see that change occurring at CHS any time soon.
Suggestions for Future Research

While the research in this study only targeted a small group of participants from one school, my hope is that it can be used a conversation-starter and reference for school employees, specifically in the identified area discussed within this body of work. It is necessary for the topic of racial equality and equity to be in the forefront of educational discourse due to the continued inequities that marginalized populations face on a daily basis.

A qualitative research approach permitted the stories of students who have endured countless struggles along their paths towards educational success to be told through the process of counter-storytelling. We were fortunate to see that the participants were able to overcome many roadblocks that may have been crippling to others, and have come through with dignity and a deeper self-awareness than before. Counter-storytelling gave the participants a chance to be heard and provided a chance for empathy and understanding.

Research involving Critical Race Theory and culturally-relevant pedagogy must be a continued area of interest. While this research study has been completed, this type of work cannot stop, and I would happily continue to find students who can assist educators with improving their knowledge and understanding with marginalized populations. Research in different areas of the country while using a larger sample size would allow us to see similarities and possible differences in the experience of marginalized students throughout the country.
Reflection and Action Plan

The topic of this research study was very important to me because of the situations that I witnessed throughout the years at CHS. I have a unique position that allows me to get to know my students on a deeper level. While I thought that I knew a lot of information about my selected participants, I never had the opportunity to have long discussions with them on a mature, adult level. The time that they have been out of school felt like a flash for me and I had not changed, they were now adults and have experienced new situations in life. Their reflection of the past was eye-opening because I learned about their past traumas, the apprehensions that they dealt with in school, and areas that they have experienced growth in. Understanding these issues will help me with my future students. The participants were all very open and willing to share and I felt like they all were capable of making a positive influence in society based on their resiliency and positive attitudes. I thought that their reflections on their educational experiences were relevant and their experiences and views supported my research. Unfortunately, whether it was research from the nineties like Ladson-Billings or the stories from these young adults from the mid-to-late 2010’s, the hurdles were still the same and little has changed in school. When I first started as a school counselor, I knew nothing about the background of the majority of my students. Throughout the years and specifically during this study, I have learned far more than I intended to about my students and myself. I have learned that it is critical to truly learn about the culture of students and incorporate that culture into every part of their educational setting. Looking through a lens where you do not see color or differences within your students does not help. Celebrating differences, understanding differences, and having a genuine interest in creating an
inclusive environment within an educational setting is what is important and necessary. I have also learned to look deeper into my own biases and lack of understanding about the never-ending struggles of marginalized populations. My job as a counselor is to advocate for my students and I have learned that being an advocate does not look the same for every student. As a White woman, I recognize that I have not even scratched the surface of the issues that marginalized people face on a daily basis, but my unearned place of privilege affords me the opportunity to help others who may feel that their voice is not being heard, specifically students. One of the survey participants from the class of 2016 took the time to give me advice, “Advocate for your students, learn about your students, uplift your students, and support them.”

One way that I plan to use my research from this study is to help create an awareness in the beautiful intricacies of different cultures for myself and others who are committed to providing an equitable and welcoming environment for our students. I have been given the opportunity to take on another school counseling position in a new center for advanced studies opening in August, 2021. This position will be more of a leadership position and I am hopeful that I will have an opportunity to make a difference in more student’s lives. We have almost finished hiring a diverse staff full of passionate personalities and the diversity was intentional. The students will be coming to our school from three different high schools, each containing their own unique school culture. I believe that it will be critical to understand, value, and respect the students from all three schools to ensure success, the feeling of belonging, and equity within the building. Due to my new role, I will advocate for all of the students and request that we will provide access to meaningful professional development opportunities that the staff can participate
in or have access to. One PD opportunity that I specifically will seek out will be a Gullah/Geechee speaker. I know that I would have benefitted from understanding the unique language when I first began my career. Understanding the student population can only help bridge the gap between home and school and it allows for the possibility of incorporating the students’ home life and culture into the school curriculum.

Recognizing that Black students are often forced to look outside of the school building in places like the church or after school activities for relevant support and the ability to feel equal and included is something that needs to be further examined. Even though multiple participants had a teacher or two who they connected to and appreciated their extra attention, the number of connections should be far greater considering almost every teacher throughout their education was White. Looking back personally, it would have been helpful to know the meaning of the words that my students were using, such as the word “box” means to hit someone, “churn” means children, or “boonkey” is referencing someone’s behind. A simple sentence such as, “Imma box those churn for talking about my boonkey” went right over my head as an educator because I lacked the understanding of the culture and language. Understanding your students may mean the difference between the student receiving an unnecessary referral for slapping or hitting someone because they have been disrespected or deescalating the situation and working on techniques to calm the student down.

Additionally, I plan to continue to research local, state, and national issues regarding race in the educational system. I want to stay informed and knowledgeable about issues that my students may face so I am in a position where I can advocate for
their education and overall wellbeing. I plan on remaining humble and allowing my students to teach me, because they are the experts on their lives and culture.

**Limitations**

The limitations that I experienced throughout this research study were due to the adults and the system. I did not receive any issues from the participants. The participants were eager to share their experiences and happy that someone wanted to hear about them. Due to the nature of the topic, the district of CHS and ultimately, my employer, refused to allow my research to be conducted on current students. I received approval from the IRB and I had many participants selected that I knew I would not have a problem receiving parental approval from. The district has a long history with racially-based complaints and while I understood the fear of additional racial issues emerging, I ensured the district research department that the research would be about the positive qualities of teachers and instruction. The final answer was not in my favor and that is why I decided to use participants who were of the age of consent and no longer attended CHS. I also approached my principal and let him know about my research topic and my passion behind it. He barely acknowledged me and did not offer any support, and I felt defeated once again. At the time, I could not understand why people in positions of power who might be able to create a positive change with the collected data would not be interested in doing whatever they could to improve the lives of our students. Nevertheless, I continued with my research alone because I believed in the process and the importance of my study. My principal never asked me about it again.

A significant limitation that arose during this study was the sudden global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which shut down schools, eliminated the chance for face-to-face
meetings with my participants, and forced possible participants to put anything school related to the side because they had to help their families. People were losing their jobs, families were struggling, college students were forced to come home, family members were getting ill, and there was an overall sense of panic for almost a year. I understood the lack of contact during that time and I knew that I was struggling for at least a few months myself due to children being forced to stay home and participate in virtual learning. It was an unexpected roadblock that we all had to forge through and luckily, we have been able to make it to the end, where we are thankful and forever-changed.

**Conclusion**

Culturally-Relevant Pedagogy and creating an educational environment that allows a diverse population to feel cared for, understood, respected, and supported by their teachers and all staff members within a school building needs to be a priority. For far too long, Black students and other marginalized populations of students have been neglected and if the educational system will not initiate policies to create improvements, it is up to the school-level employees to ensure that the equal treatment of all students is occurring. With the knowledge of effective culturally-relevant strategies and the understanding of the importance and impact that positive teacher-student relationships have, change can occur for all students. Perhaps looking deeper into what outside systems such as churches, families, neighborhoods, and other activities are providing for our students to make them comfortable and happy, schools can make attempt to create similar atmospheres and supports while the students are in school. The research suggests that relationships matter, understanding and respecting different cultures matter, and advocating for change matters. I am hopeful that continued research in the areas of
culturally-relevant pedagogy and critical race theory will continue to occur and new advocates will emerge for the sake of education and an overall improvement in society. Our students deserve it and so does the future generation.
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1. If you could make any changes to improve teacher/staff relationships with students from different backgrounds from them, what would they be?

A: Teachers need to be thorough! They need to work on building relationships with their students in and outside the classroom! Teachers should try to relate and understand a student’s mind. (Class of 2016)

A: Being a respectable and empathic teacher who would stop any attempt of a fellow peer putting another down. (Class of 2015)

A: Just try to understand why some students come off as not wanting to talk or open up to them. Most Black kids are raised to not show emotions. Nothing may be wrong with a student but it might seem like there’s a problem. Just be respectful and most students will show the same respect. (class of 2016)

A: Be there for Black students. Actually, get to know them. Make sure that they know they can talk about the issues in the world. (Class of 2016)

A: Hire more Black teachers. Hire teachers who show well roundedness instead of pity to those who they deem unfortunate. (class of 2015)

A: Bring in teachers from the area. (class of 2015)

A: Get to know Black culture so maybe you can help educate other teachers and students
Who are White. (class of 2016)

A: Advocate for your students. Learn about them, uplift them, and support them.

2. If you experienced a negative interaction or situation with one of your teachers, please explain what happened as best as you can and how you felt after.

A: All teachers not stopping any type of racial discrimination that would happen in the halls to any of the students. (Class of 2015)

A: Mrs. A. once mistook me for another African American student. She claimed I squeezed her hand really hard and hurt her. After denying if, I was further asked and threatened by administration and it wasn’t until after the cameras reported what truly happened, that I received an apology. That was one of the most embarrassing and hurtful moments in high school. She was nice after that and I did like her, but it kind of felt like she saw us all the same for a moment. (class of 2015)

3. If you could make any changes to improve teacher/staff relationships with students from different backgrounds from them, what would they be?

A: Teach real history instead of Texas mandated history. (Class of 2015)

4. Do you think the Gullah culture should be taught in school?

A: It should be offered to students of that cultural background. Some non-black families Wouldn’t want their kids learning about it. (Class of 2015)

5. If there was one thing that you could tell me that would help my research and/or help future students of WAHS, what would that be?

A: Teachers at CHS have a bad experience with a student and tell all of the other faculty and staff and the kid is forever treated typecast as a horrible student who is unworthy of being able to be helped. Also, a lot of rules are only applied to certain students not
students as a whole. Whether it is dress code or disciplinary. (2016)

6. If you could make any changes to improve teacher/staff relationships with students from different backgrounds from them, what would they be?
A: Maybe actually talking to kids instead of assuming the worse. Even when kids act out they usually are dealing with a lot of stuff at home. (2016)

7. If you experienced a negative interaction or situation with one of your teachers, please explain what happened as best as you can and how you felt after.
A: One time I got in trouble for putting Carmex (the Chapstick on). I sat all the way in the back of the class. My teacher she stopped class to yell at me for putting on Carmex. She said I was distracting the classroom. No one was watching me all the way in the back of the class room putting on Chapstick. They only started watching me when she stopped teaching to yell at me for putting on Chapstick. I was a freshman in high school. Super self-conscious in a school that was not my home school so I knew not a soul. I only went because it was said to be better than my home school.

8. What type of challenges (if any) did you face in school?
A: Being a black woman. (class of 2016)

9. Did you feel like you had to codeswitch (changing the way you speak depending on who you are talking to) in school to fit in?
A: I have to code switch any time I leave my house. If I didn’t I would be seen as “aggressive, loud, or ignorant”. (class of 2016)

10. Please describe a memorable positive experience that you had with one of your teachers.
A: Some teachers teach traits that help me better deal with how I code switch in the
world. I’m not sure if they are aware but it has helped me a lot in life.

A: Each teacher who wanted to see their students be successful. Personally, taking all honors classes, they (the teachers) pushed us harder, requiring more of us which I see as a strong positive for me. (class of 2018)

A: Mrs. H pulled me to the side one day to tell me how special I was and that I have to apply myself. She made me realize that if I don’t put forth the effort, I won’t get the results I want in life. (class of 2016)

A: My entire senior year, I felt that my teachers cared for me. They always went the extra mile to show compassion towards me. One of my teachers, Mrs. L, poured into me mentally and enable me to strive for greatness and further my education. (class of 2016)

A: Mrs. S. treated me like I was her own child. (class of 2015)

A: I lost my lunch money and in the midst of looking for it, my English teacher, Mrs. S reached into her purse and offered me lunch money instead! That was seven years ago. Never forgot that! (class of 2015)

11. If you had a teach who you loved, what qualities/teaching strategies made them a good teacher, in your opinion?

A: The willingness to understand and listen. (class of 2015)

A: Mr. M. was a great teacher. He compared everything we learned about to real life situations. That helped us understand easier and understand the importance of why we needed to know what he was teaching. (class of 2016)

A: Mrs. C stayed on my ass. She wouldn’t let me fail. She is like the model teacher.
A: Someone who listens and someone who relates. Someone who might not understand something personally, but can put themselves in a student’s shoes. Teachers who remember what it was like to be a kid. (Class of 2016)

A: The ability to relate to their students. (class of 2015)

A: Being real with us. (class of 2015)

A: Mrs. S was a great English teacher. I promise I apply the lessons she taught me about life in general. She definitely put it in me that you have to work hard for whatever you want in life to be successful. She was a great mentor and a very strong woman to look up to. (class of 2018)
APPENDIX B
INVITATION LETTER FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

Invitation Letter for Exempt Research

You are being invited to participate in a research project by Lindsay Johnson-Hansen, a school counselor at West Ashley High School and a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina. This study will be conducted to identify the specific qualities and teaching styles that White teachers have when teaching Black students. The goal of this research is to try to improve the teacher-student relationships in order to create a more positive culture within our school building. You were selected to participate in this study because of your age, your experiences with teachers, and your background. I expect to be working on this study for approximately one semester and will collect data directly from at least ten to twenty students who have graduated.

You will be asked to answer a questionnaire and participate in an interview with the researcher via email or a web chat program such as Google Hangout. Both forms of data collection will take approximately 15–30 minutes each. You may be asked to complete an additional survey if more information is necessary for the researcher to get clarification on certain issues.

You are under no obligation to participate in this research, it is your choice whether to be a part of the study or not. You may decide not to be a part of the study and even if you have accepted to take part in the initial questionnaire and have begun to fill it out, you may stop and leave the study. There will be no bias or penalty from the researcher or the University of South Carolina if you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop participating in the research.

There is no particular benefit to you if you participate, but the researcher may learn what strategies and practices may improve the relationships between White teachers and Black students. This project may allow important research to be done for the students who are currently in high school and for the overall culture of the schools. The only risk to you is the possible inconvenience of taking up your time filling out the forms or speaking to the researcher.

The results of this research may be published by the University of South Carolina but no personal information about any of the people who were included will be part of any of the reports. The forms you are filling out today as well as the questionnaires and notes will be destroyed after all the data has been entered into analysis. If you have any questions about this research or your participation in the study you are welcome to contact the researcher at any time at LMJ5@email.sc.edu or the researcher’s dissertation advisor, Dr. Todd Lilly at Lillyt98@mailbox.sc.edu. We will make every effort to answer your questions.
APENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

Lindsay Johnson-Hansen
College of Education
Department of Instruction & Teacher Education / Curriculum & Instruction
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: Pro00078599

Dear Mrs. Lindsay Johnson-Hansen:

This is to certify that the research study Examining the Relationship between White Teachers and Black High School Students: How Positive Relationships Can Impact Educational Success, was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104(d)(1), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 6/21/2019. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Lisa Johnson at lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu or (803) 777-6670.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
ORC Assistant Director and IRB Manager