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# White Blindness: An Investigation Into Teacher Whiteness and Racial Ignorance

Mary Katharine Brasche

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WHITE BLINDNESS:  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO TEACHER WHITENESS AND RACIAL IGNORANCE

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Raye and Coco. You two are the light of my life, my biggest joys, and my greatest accomplishments. You inspire me to be a better person, a better mom, and a better teacher. Coco, your unconditional love and contagious smile are a joy to behold; you bring light and laughter to everyone you meet. Raye, your kindness and compassion are undervalued strengths in this world. Your empathetic nature and gentle spirit are a marvel to witness.

To my father, Kevin Brasche, I know you will never read this in its entirety, but your guiding presence was greatly appreciated. You were a rock of support through many grueling evenings and weekends of labored research, work, and writing. To my mom, Lee Brasche, you taught me what it means to be a great mom and an inspiring teacher; this is for you.

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## ABSTRACT

White supremacy and domination are the backbone foundation of the United States and have been long documented in its history. The prevalence of whiteness and white supremacy is not isolated to social situations or commerce but fundamentally ingrained in the education system. While *Brown v. the Board of Education* abolished the notion of separate but equal, the education of a diverse American student population remains predominantly at the hands of White, female educators. This action research study, using an investigative mixed-methods design, attempted to address educator whiteness at a small, rural high school in the Southeastern United States. Treatment participants were assigned reading from a commonly used social justice text that was then discussed in a series of discussion groups. Constructs such as white supremacy, racism, and culturally relevant pedagogy were addressed and discussed by the all-white female veteran teachers.

The framework that guided the research questions, readings, and discussion groups were the intersection of critical race theory and whiteness studies. Results indicated a statistically significant change in participant awareness of white privilege on the Color-Blind Racial Attitude Scale (CoBRAS) survey between the pre- and posttest administration of the instrument. Qualitative data supported the findings and featured themes of lived experiences witnessing racism, racism, and white ignorance and awareness. Most treatment participants indicated change in culturally relevant pedagogy

with the majority of participants continuing their learning and self-awareness after the study had completed. An action plan suggesting avenues of additional learning and course for white teacher racial growth are provided in addition to direction of future research.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Whiteness. To most white Americans, the notion that their skin pigmentation has bearing on the outcomes of their lives is foreign. While recognizing other races, many white people do not racialize themselves or see race being used unfairly against People of Color (DiAngelo, 2018; DiAngelo, 2021). This racial blindness and covert racism serve to preserve the white status in society, elevating white people above People of Color, by making aspects of white lives inherently easier because of the socially acceptable color of skin pigmentation ((DiAngelo, 2006; DiAngelo, 2018; DiAngelo, 2021). Being white carries inherent privilege and power that shapes daily life. For example, white status and privilege are repeatedly documented in adult life, exempting white lives from higher incarceration rates, severe judicial punishments, lower income jobs, and targeting by law enforcement that People of Color routinely face (Alexander, 2020). The implication of whiteness and whitewashing of American educators in schools remain unexplored, undocumented, and unchanged.

Whiteness serves to elevate white people in the racial hierarchy. The ability to pretend the racial class system does not exist is a luxury of white privilege and is extended to white teachers and students in the classroom. The whiteness of American schools serves to “deny students of color an equal opportunity to learn in U.S. schools, but also most pointedly, to elevate the position of White students” (DiAngelo, 2006, p.

1983). Whiteness encompasses cultural practices that remain unidentified and unquestioned because they have been so normalized that educators fail to see them working within the classroom and school walls (DiAngelo, 2006). Challenging the unquestioned norms of racial power and interrupting the social dynamics within a classroom requires educators to see whiteness as a set of pedagogical practices designed to maintain the current cultural status quo. Challenging the cultural status quo—the whitewashing—is met with white rage, fragility, and guilt under the guise of denying equal opportunity to whites (DiAngelo, 2018; DiAngelo, 2021). Therefore, educators must “become ‘cultural brokers’ fluent in recognizing and articulating the active dynamics of Whiteness in order to help create psychologically beneficial pedagogical space for all students” (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1985).

Growing up in a small town as an upper-middle class, Christian, white female, I had no idea I was racially privileged. While some of these early defining characteristics still hold true, some are no longer the cornerstones of my sense of self. These characteristics, however, were crucial to my perspective and ignorance in my beginning years of teaching.

While I believe I failed miserably as a beginning teacher, my school district would disagree. During my first two years of teaching, I had the highest end-of-course examination pass rate in my department. I diligently followed individualized education and behavioral modifications plans. I was quick to notify guidance and child services of any student mistreatment. I was able to stop all fights before there was any physical contact between the participants. I was able to instruct my students in content and

deescalate social conflicts, or so I thought. When I left my first school, I had glowing letters of recommendation from my department chair and principal.

As a beginning teacher, I was successful at checking the boxes and having my students perform on standardized assessments. However, I failed to understand my students on a personal level and the significance of my racial identity. I would routinely have classes composed of 80–90% Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students and would regularly be the only white female in the classroom. My ignorance to systematic racism is a luxury afforded to me by my skin that I capitalized on and used as an educator. I invoked colorblindness, pretending race did not matter and did not “consider the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as Other” (Hirald, 2010, p. 56).

I thought I knew my students—that I could see beyond the color of someone’s skin and see the person inside—but I did not understand the systematic racism against Students of Color, and I continued to ignorantly perpetuate white privilege. By doing so and pretending race did not matter, I disregarded and overlooked the meaning that is attached to race, rather than disassociating race from the meaning (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995). Now, I understand how my whiteness and lack of social awareness caused me to systematically and persistently incorporate discrimination into my classroom because as a white teacher, I had never experienced racial discrimination (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995).

Recently, I re-entered public high school education, where I teach all levels but predominantly lower academic achieving students, many with academic and socio-emotional hurdles to overcome. In these classes, I have witnessed an overwhelming

segregation of my students based on perceived student ability. Students of Color are usually placed in lower-level courses, while their white counterparts tend to place into higher courses based on arbitrary test scores (Grissom & Redding, 2016). There is no difference in process ability or intelligence among racial identities. Students of Color are not inherently bad in academics, but predominantly white teacher placement often categorizes BIPOC children as such, academically disadvantaging these students compared to their White peers (Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2017). Grissom and Redding (2016) investigated the relationship between the race of the teacher and race of the student and found the race of the teacher had a significant impact on student placement in advanced courses because “reliance on teacher referrals can disadvantage Students of Color if teachers hold lower expectations for them or are less likely to recognize giftedness in such students” (p. 1).

The impact of white privilege and racism often goes undiagnosed and untreated. Very few colleges and universities offer racial awareness and social justice courses for graduates, perpetuating white racial ignorance and affecting classroom climate dynamics (Sleeter, 2017). In addition, in-service teacher professional development opportunities focus on curriculum, standardized assessments, and technology, leaving racism and racial professional development a costly and time-consuming endeavor that educators must seek themselves. If colleges and universities do not include meaningful racial studies that can penetrate white social norms for pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers do not receive professional development on these same topics, how will educators remove the veil of blindness to individual racial bias and the systematic racism so pervasive in our American schools?



## Problem Statement

The precursor to the current racial disparity seen in public education was the ruling and implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The ripple effects of its abysmal execution are still being felt today, over 60 years later. *Brown v. Board of Education* serves as a reminder for education and social reform: Teachers need to be prepared to educate racially diverse classrooms and improve the learning outcomes of all students, not only students who racially identify with the teacher (Brittain, 2004). By addressing educator racism, specifically White educators, we can begin to shift the educational paradigm to be more incorporative and address current forms of inequality and racism (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995).

Approximately 80% of traditional teacher college graduates are white, while less than half of the K–12 population is also white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Additionally, white students' complete university certification programs at significantly higher rates than Students of Color, increasing the racial disparity between student and educator populations (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In a predominantly white, monochromatic educator workforce, it is imperative for teachers to thoroughly examine their whiteness and reflect on the implications their race and social lens has on all students. If in-service teachers are to supply equitable education to an everchanging student population, teachers need to investigate and examine the impact of their whiteness and implicit racism in the classroom. "Describing the production of Whiteness in the classroom allows White teachers to identify how they have internalized racialized group preferences and how these preferences may impede their ability to teach all their students" (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1986).

Social justice and racism awareness need to be on-going, encouraging teachers to be more inclusive and thus more effective in disrupting current culturally responsive pedagogy that is not sufficient to affect deficit theorizing about students (Hiraldo, 2010; Sleeter, 2017). There is no quick fix to pedagogical and curricular reform that would instantly remove the operations of whiteness in teachers, schools, and education. While “it is unlikely that any of us will live to see the complete eradication of racism from our schools and universities” (Gillborn, 2019, p. 117), we must diligently work towards the ultimate goal: “To conceptualize Whiteness not as a fixed and unified ‘thing,’ but rather as a set of practices, including the practice of Whites racializing others but not themselves, allows teachers to identify, and begin to change, those practices” (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1984). By empowering and challenging white educators to alter the status quo, a difference can be achieved, one educator and classroom at a time. White teachers, whatever the intent, tend to treat Children of Color as having less academic ability but more disciplinary challenges (Gillborn, 2019). By encouraging White educators to become more reflective of their whiteness and the implications in their classrooms, the quality of education can improve for all students. If education remains stagnant, thereby perpetuating white privilege, the institutionalized racism of our schools will continue and hinder the academic and future success of Students of Color.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of an investigation is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed in the research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework needs to be sufficiently grounded in the identified problem of practice and interwoven in the goals of the study’s research questions. In this research study, I used

critical race theory as my overarching theoretical framework. Critical race theory in education “seeks to identify, analyze, and transform subtle and overt forms of racism in education in order to transform society” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 4). While asking white educators to grapple with racial discrimination and racism might result in anger, frustration, and white fragility, a deeper understanding of systematic racism needed to be obtained by in-service teachers to improve the classroom environment and education for all students (Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011; DiAngelo, 2018).

Critical race theory (CRT) provided a framework in which to incorporate multi-faceted social justice and cultural inclusion in the classroom climate. CRT appeared in the 1970s, led by Derrick Bell, as a way to expedite racial reform in the United States (Hiraldo, 2010). While CRT originally gained ground within the social justice system, the five tenets—storytelling, permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and critique of liberalism—could be extrapolated to benefit American education (Hiraldo, 2010). This action research intervention was intended to uncover in-service white educators’ racial bias, thus examining how race and racism has perpetuated social disparities between dominant and marginalized groups (Hiraldo, 2010). While some stakeholders might disagree with the prevalence of racial discrimination and racism in education, when the majority of educators are white and the majority of students are not, the racial identity of the teacher poses a significant nonverbal message in the social dynamics within classrooms. White educators need to understand that Students of Color in their classroom have a vastly dissimilar experience than their white peers (DiAngelo, 2006). The internalized whiteness of the teacher effects the classroom environment and can hinder the teacher’s ability to teach all students (DiAngelo, 2006; Gillborn, 2019).

To investigate the depth of teacher racism, the permanence of racism needed to be investigated and explored. By using CRT, Sleeter (2017) “identified various structures and processes that perpetuate Whiteness but are so normalized that they are usually taken for granted” (p. 163). Examining the campus climate for cultural competency was an effective way of becoming more diverse and inclusive (Hiraldo, 2010). Allowing in-service teachers an opportunity to reflect and examine their racial bias, whiteness, could “provide opportunities for further research in the ways...to become more inclusive” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). Often White teachers are unaware of their privileges based on membership to the dominant social group because the privileges of being white are so normalized, they are expected (Adams and Zuniga, 2016; DiAngelo, 2021).

Critique of liberalism stems from the flawed notion of colorblindness and equal opportunities. By evoking colorblindness, White educators do not account for ways race matters in education, supporting the continued whiteness and whitewashing of education and our schools (Sleeter, 2017). Colorblind ideology positions race as a taboo topic that is not socially acceptable to discuss and subsequently perpetuates the racial problems that persist in society that are so difficult to address (Bell et al., 2016). “Participants need information that can help them understand how color-blind ideology actually reproduces racism” (Bell et al., 2016, p. 170). Garcia, Agbemakplido, Abdela, Lopez, and Registe (2006) found students valued teachers who could cultivate respectful, safe, culturally sensitive environments, thus improved student overall acceptance and learning. Teacher whiteness as perpetuation of colorblindness and perceived equal opportunities needed to be addressed for a richer understanding to the systematic racial oppression operating within schools.

In addition to framing the study within CRT, framing using critical whiteness studies was also used to support the perspective of the research questions. White people hold a disproportionate control of power and influence as a collective group and are not pursuing equity and social justice; whites seek to preserve the status quo (Gillborn, 2019). The CRT framework of the study addressed teacher whiteness through permanence of racism and critique of liberalism, as well as the additional framing theory of whiteness.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to understand and explore the awareness of whiteness of White female teachers and their ability to teach culturally relevant pedagogy in the high school classroom. At the time of this research, whiteness was defined as the societal structures that continually reproduced white privilege and what it meant to be white in a society that constantly reinforced systematic racism.

Educators are in a position of educational power, instructing children on the concepts of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable. While educators often want to deliver bias-free messages to students, teaching them racism, oppression, and discrimination are bad, they are not free from the racialized and oppressive society in which they live. White people's racism often appears covert and is undetected to other White people but is routinely inflicted racial microaggressions on BIPOC lives. While educators might be versed in how other White people's racism works, their "identities are not separate from the white supremacist society in which we are raised, and our patterns of cross-racial engagement are not merely a function of our unique personalities" (DiAngelo, 2021, p. xii). Therefore, White educators who believe in racial justice and the

end of racial suffrage need to continue to explore and understand the whiteness that perpetually works within themselves.

### **Research Question**

This research study aimed to address three research questions:

1. What are teacher responses toward examining their whiteness?
2. What are the classroom implications, if any, regarding examining whiteness and how it may impact teaching those who are culturally different?
3. What changes, if any, are made to teacher whiteness when examined?

This action research case study provided a general overview of the depths of whiteness within one high school and promoted open dialogue to improve racial bias awareness among all stakeholders. If a school wants to employ socially conscious, extraordinarily successful, long-term educators, we, as a collaborative research team, need to invest quality time and resources into cultivating educators who are versed in their perpetuation of the systematic racism in our school and created meaningful discussion to strengthen teachers to overcome their own racial allegiance and projection of white power.

The results of this investigation were shared with research participants and made available to district- and school-level administration in an effort to improve racial awareness, better understand the manifestations of whiteness in educators, and reduce the effects of teacher whiteness in the classroom.

## Key Terms

For the purposes of this research, several key terms were identified and defined for clarity. When referring to the distinction between prejudice, discrimination, and racism, *prejudice* includes the thoughts and feelings based on stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little to no individual/personal experience and then projected onto everyone in the group (DiAngelo, 2018). Generally, prejudices are widely accepted because the same social message is received and interpreted. Prejudice cannot be avoided; everyone is prejudiced. *Discrimination* is the action(s) that results from prejudices: the different treatment of individuals based on the societal message that was interpreted. *Racism* is a form of discrimination, “when a racial group’s prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 21). Racism is a societally backed, discriminatively oppressive system that no longer depends on the good intentions of its citizens but is automatically reproduced and has become a societal default (DiAngelo, 2018). In American society, racism sustains systematic benefits for White lives as a collective group and “structure discrimination, oppression, dispossession, and exclusion for people from targeted racial groups” (Bell et al., 2016, p.134; DiAngelo, 2021).

*Whiteness* is the “system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly center the interests of white people, especially white elite” (Gillborn, 2019). White lives hold a disproportionate control of the power and influence and as a collective group are not pursuing equity and social justice; white people seek to preserve the racial status quo (Gillborn, 2019). “Racial power and inequities are at the core of whiteness, but all forms of power and inequity create and perpetuate whiteness” (Castagno, 2013, p. 101).

The disproportionate power held by white people is referred to as *white privilege* and/or *white supremacy*. Applebaum (2012) described white supremacy not as the blatant racist acts of a few white people but as “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas...which are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutional and social settings” (p. 616). White privilege/supremacy has been so normalized that most white people are unaware of its existence and take for granted the advantages and privilege they receive (Bell et al., 2016).

For this research, *white fragility* refers to the self-defense response evoked when whiteness is challenged. Challenging whiteness throws off white racial balance, and this imbalance results in discomfort. Because white people are not used to sustained racial discomfort, they find it unbearable and want it to stop and will use manipulative techniques to end the perceived discomfort (DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility is displayed in a multitude of manipulative techniques to reconcile racial discomfort and redirect the attention to individuals identified as BIPOC, often making race their problem. These manipulation techniques include, but are not limited to, white rage, white guilt, evoking colorblindness, and claiming reverse racism.

*BIPOC* is an acronym used to include Black, Indigenous, People of Color. Black and Indigenous people are particularly relevant in the United States as a way to acknowledge the historical reference to the white supremacy that has historically and currently enforced the harshest degree of racism (DiAngelo, 2021). While there is not universal agreement on the usage of the term, as it collapses a substantial portion of People of Color from diverse racial groups into POC, it is currently the most



incorporative and inclusive term used: “The acronym is the most current usage that I am aware of but not necessarily recognized fully” (DiAngelo, 2021, p. xviii). BIPOC will be the term most often used within this dissertation unless specifics to Black, white, or other peoples are individually named and referenced.

### **Positionality**

Positionality refers to my role, as the researcher, and my relation to my participants and setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The things that I know are inextricably linked to how I see and how I understand myself in the world (Charest, 2019). I would be amiss if my position in relation to the research topic and participants was not thoroughly examined.

As a member of the case study’s faculty, I was provided an insider perspective and voice to promote the need to explore whiteness in educators. This study was designed by an insider in collaboration with insider’s framework. This format sought to “engage their members in learning and change; they can work toward influencing organizational change; and they can offer opportunities for personal, professional, and institutional transformation” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 47). As a member of the case study’s faculty, I filled the traditional role by initiating the research project and reaching out to other insiders: the tenure school faculty (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 49). The collaborative approach to inquiry used, teacher study groups, helped move the group forward from individuals to a cooperative learning community promoting self-reflection and community growth (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

In addition, the research topic, whiteness, provided insider in collaboration with other insiders positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The intervention sought to engage other in-service teachers as a collaborative research team to examine teacher whiteness and its hindrance to Students of Color in the classroom. As a collaborative group, we engaged “in inquiry in ways that help the group move from working as isolated individuals toward a collaborative community” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, pp. 46-47). As a team, we examined whiteness and its effects on the learning experience within the classroom for all students, specifically Students of Color.

I will never understand what it means to be a Person of Color, more specifically, a Person of Color in a white society. My insider perspective, as a white female, provided an autoethnographic detail to whiteness studies; I understood what it meant to be white and to benefit from white privilege and supremacy. When “teacher researchers are dealing with issues of educational equity for diverse student populations, an honest examination of oneself in relation to children’s experiences is essential” (Klehr, 2012, p. 126). My inherent white privilege in a system designed for white success required that I remained diligent to the nuances and ways whiteness were conditioned to display because of the society in which I live. I live in a society created by people who look like me and for people who look like me.

In addition, I understood that racial work, whiteness work, was better received by white people when spoken by another white person. The irony of this was not lost on me. As DiAngelo (2021) pointed out, “educating white people on racism and getting them to change attitudes and behaviors is rarely easy, the nature of implicit bias is that white people are more likely to be open to initial challenges to our racial positions,

perspectives, and behaviors from a fellow white person” (p. xv). In conducting this research, I understood that I challenged white solidarity and tried to expose the inner workings of whiteness within the school system. Whiteness will continue to operate in full to the advantage of White students and disadvantage of BIPOC students as long as it remains unnamed and unexplored by the educators who routinely reinforce it.

### **Significance of the Study**

Action research was selected for this study to fully investigate how whiteness, racial blindness, worked within white female educators and how to minimize the knowledge gap and awareness of whiteness within teachers. I anticipated being able to incorporate racial awareness and racial education into school-level continuing education, professional development that could then be incorporated at a district and regional level.

This study was not intended to be generalizable and was specific to the location geographically and within the current racialized climate within the United States. While the results could not be generalized, it may be of significant interest to other educators interested in whiteness studies, teacher whiteness, and the projection of white ideals onto students. This should be of particular interest to white teachers and administrators who wish to improve the unawareness of racial privilege and white supremacy within their schools and improve the educational experiences of BIPOC students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study expanded the understanding of whiteness and white supremacy among white female high school teachers and how it affects the classroom environment. For the purposes of this study and to control aspects of the dialogue, White

males and BIPOC people were excluded from the investigation. While the consideration of gender was beyond the scope of this study, the exclusion of the white male perspective limited the findings. The white male perspective could have added insight into how gender can influence the intersectionality of whiteness and a culturally relevant classroom. However, having only female participants was deliberate and provided a deeper insight into the experiences of females as their female voice was not marginalized by a male presence. While this was speculative, to be certain, I would have needed to have a male perspective and voice for comparison.

Another limitation of this study was the restrictive nature of the school and state budget proviso 1.105, which restricted the opportunity to openly discuss race and critical race theory in public schools at the risk of eliminating district-level funding. As a result, I was not able to openly solicit for research participation or openly discuss research topics during the school day with participants. The restrictions placed upon this research due to proviso 1.105 limited the accessibility of discussion and proved to be an obstacle for willing participants to overcome. This limited the depth of my findings because it limited the available pool of participants to those who were openly willing to embrace the after-hours inconvenience. As a result, my findings were most likely not indicative of how all white females at the case study location felt, only those who could be inconvenienced by proviso 1.105. In Chapter 3, I elaborate on this limitation and explain how I redesigned aspects of the study to address my problem of practice, despite governmental limitations.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth detail of background literature about the racial history in the United States, specifically in education, the theoretical framework, and

existing studies currently published within education. Chapter 3 supplies a detailed description of the methodological design and data collection techniques used for this mixed methods investigation. Chapter 4 describes the research findings and how they relate to each research question. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings and recommendations for further research on the topic of white teacher racial blindness.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To begin Chapter 2, a literature review and the problem of practice are introduced. Subsequently, the theoretical frameworks, critical whiteness studies and critical race theory, are discussed through the research of the historical and present-day literature to frame the action research investigation for this study.

#### **Chapter Organization**

The purpose of this literature review is to focus on more recent history and the intersection of critical race theory and critical whiteness studies in education. The literature review provides an understanding of the modern history of the educational climate and the need for additional research in the area of practicing teacher whiteness through the intersectionality of theoretical frameworks, critical race theory and critical whiteness theory.

To conduct a review of existing literature, an initial investigation was conducted using the University of South Carolina's online library search databases EBSCO and ERIC. Searches were completed using broad topic key words: critical race theory and whiteness. These preliminary searches led to a snowball investigation based on relevant resources listed in reference sections of peer reviewed articles. Additional searches for leaders in the field were conducted using EBSCO and ERIC based on professor

recommendation. While peer-reviewed journal articles were most of the literature discussed, more information was gleaned through news sources, webinars, textbooks, other books, and pop culture to better understand the racialized climate that was influencing students, teachers, and the American education system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A critical race theory in education seeks to identify, analyze, and transform forms of racism within education in order to transform society (Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). It seeks to understand and analyze the role of race and racism in society, perpetuating disparities between white and BIPOC (Hiraldo, 2010). For this investigation, teacher responses were viewed through a critical race theory lens, providing the theoretical backbone to data analysis.

Critical race theorists assume that those who understand the microaggressions of racism best are not its perpetrators but rather those who are systematically and routinely victimized by it (Sleeter, 2017). Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) groundbreaking introduction to critical race theory in education paid particular attention to school inequalities. Critical race theory in education is pillared on three central propositions: "race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequality in the United States, U.S. society is based on property rights, the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social inequality" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48).

The intersection of race and property, one of the tenets of critical race theory, extended from slavery, where white lives were inherently linked to privilege and Black

lives as subordination (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This legacy has resulted as whiteness, having “light colored ‘white’ skin, as a property that entitles its wearer to rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoy, reputation and status, and the absolute right to exclude others” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.60; McIntosh, 1989). Critical race theory in education should create “radically new paradigms that ensure justice” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62), pressing upon education a sense of urgency to repair the legacy of discrimination and injustice that exists within education and society as a whole. Incorporating critical race theory perspectives into intentional daily practice in education cultivates awareness around race and the production of racialized inequality within education (Hiraldo, 2010).

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

Critical whiteness studies, the sub-theory framing this dissertation research, helped to understand the full extent of how whiteness manifests itself within the teacher and altered their experience and perception of racism (Tosolt, 2020). “White people exert disproportionate power and influence” (Gillborn, 2019, p. 115); white imagery and awareness reinforces the dominant white ideology, downplaying the reality and effects of race in the Person of Color’s lived experience (Matias et al., 2014; Matias & Mackey, 2015). Critical whiteness studies acknowledge the danger of whiteness, especially when whites assume the role of dictating what is and is not racist (Matias et al., 2014). “This places the manifestations of race and racism in the hands of those who racially benefit from the subjugation of people of color” (Matias et al., 2014, p. 296). It is within this critical whiteness framework, where whiteness is normative and invisible, that the culture of white teachers emerges. White people do not see whiteness as a racialized identity



(McIntosh, 1989; Tosolt, 2020). At the conclusion of teacher certification programs, “what most teachers had learned about culturally responsive pedagogy was not sufficiently potent to disrupt deficit theorizing about students” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 157).

As white preservice teachers fail to acknowledge or see race, they generally evoke a colorblindness ideology, a central tenet of critical race theory. The idea of colorblindness manifested from the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. “While colorblindness sounds good in theory, in practice it is highly problematic. We do see the race of other people, and that race has meaning for us” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 131). The ability to be colorblind is a luxury afforded by those in power and majority, white lives, as they do not racialize themselves (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; DiAngelo, 2022); ignoring someone’s race is failing to acknowledge all the ways in which race matters and affects daily life. By claiming colorblindness and not acknowledging the race of BIPOC students, white teachers fail to acknowledge how racism is embedded in society and continues to play a role in schools (Aronson et al., 2020). Sleeter (2017) found “students valued teachers who could cultivate safe, respectful, culturally sensitive, and responsive learning communities and who could establish relationships with students’ families and communities” (p. 163). To promote the environment of inclusion, so desired by students, white teachers need to dismantle the protective mechanisms that protect colorblind ideologies and situation themselves within instead of outside an examination of race, only then can whiteness be confronted, and colorblind ideologies be constructively dismantled (Sleeter, 2017). Subsequently, when teachers, specifically white teachers, do interact with BIPOC students, they are able to

recognize the ways in which their whiteness reproduces itself and effects the teacher/student dynamic (DiAngelo, 2006).

### **Critical Race Theory and Education**

For many teachers, a single multicultural education course or required cultural competency training in an annual professional development is the only time white teachers experience a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understanding and ideology (DiAngelo, 2011). Even then, these courses fail to directly talk about racism, much less address the white privilege that is rampant and reinforced in the educational system (DiAngelo, 2011). Pre-service teacher candidates' assumptions about what Students of Color need leads to false empathy, a comfortable space for white teachers, but fails to meaningfully challenge beliefs and abilities to relate to Students of Color and their families (Sleeter, 2017).

White people rarely see blatant acts of racism, while People of Color experience them all the time (Solozano & Yosso, 2001). "In teacher education classrooms, we need to hear about, discuss, and analyze those racial experiences that People of Color and whites encounter in their public and private worlds" (Solozano & Yosso, 2001, p. 6) to better understand and analyze racial microaggressions.

Solomon et al. (2005) sought to understand whiteness and white privilege by exploring several strategies that teacher candidates employ to avoid addressing whiteness and its privilege. The 200-participant qualitative study required the reading of McIntosh's (1989) "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack." Participants' responses to the article were then documented and analyzed for the "ideas, messages, values, believes

and worldviews they reflect” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 152). The results highlighted the ability of participants to critically analyze the impact and existence of white privilege and its socially constructed position (Solomon et al., 2005). “The knowledge of their ancestors, using various tools of domination and oppression, have created a society in which their benefits and privileges have been amassed at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 154). White participants were very aware of the discrimination and oppression against them; however, they had difficulty identifying reverse discrimination, such as how their whiteness and racial supremacy impacted others (Solomon et al., 2005, pp. 156–157).

Matias et al. (2014) discovered that culturally responsive pre-service teacher education courses in pre-service teacher programs were not enough to overcome the white bias within pre-service teachers. The researchers conducted extensive interviews following the completion of a “Social Foundations and Issues of Cultural Diversity in Urban Education” course, and while pre-service teachers were able to critically understand race and racism, they were unable to understand the complexity of whiteness and its inherent privilege enough to engage in anti-racist social justice education (Matias et al., 2014). Matias et al. (2014) had four findings among the white teacher candidates: emotional disinvestment in racial justice, acknowledging whiteness did not push beyond recognition, displays of “white guilt,” and “overall engagement and endorsement of hegemonic whiteness” (p. 293). While these teacher candidates acknowledged that their education and understanding of race was skewed, they accepted little to no responsibility in their ignorance, instead placed blame on others (Matias et al., 2014). While acknowledging that they were advantaged because they were white, many candidates

responded with no interest or desire to suppress white supremacy within themselves or their future pedagogical instruction (Matias et al., 2014). While there were displays of guilt over being white, this guilt did not translate into affirmative action or desire to change (Matias et al., 2014). The white pre-service teacher remained blind to the everyday acts of whiteness they experienced, subsequently upholding racism, and failing to acknowledge the construction of the white imagination in everyday acts of whiteness, thus reinforcing the racial paradigm that exists within schools (Matias et al., 2014).

DiAngelo (2006) conducted an observation of a multicultural education class and found “whiteness manifested in the class as a dynamic relation between the white students and students of color, a relation supported by institutional, cultural, structural, and social process and practice” (p. 1997). DiAngelo observed a 3-hour graduate-level course in interpretive research methods that enrolled primarily pre-service educators. The purpose of the observational study was to identify whiteness as it manifests in a classroom among teachers who were actively invested in multicultural education that “incorporates the idea that all students, regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics, should have an equal opportunity to learn in school” (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1985). The goal of the study was to explore the functioning of whiteness and how privilege was produced and maintained within the classroom. Even a classroom that was focused on meaningful multicultural education still experienced the production of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2006). White students controlled the conversation, discussion, and thus the learning within the classroom (DiAngelo, 2006). White students have been socialized to be more active participants in the classroom, often to the detriment of Students of Color (DiAngelo, 2006). As educators, the role is to facilitate

discussion from everyone, often including silencing white students and allowing BIPOC students the opportunity to contribute (DiAngelo, 2006). Educators need to be more skilled and deliberate in their efforts to facilitate discussions and cognizant of their whiteness in the classroom (DiAngelo, 2006).

Gorski (2009) conducted an analysis of teacher education required multicultural courses to attempt to uncover the ways in which these courses conceptualized and framed multicultural education. By reviewing the syllabi of 45 college multicultural education courses, Gorski (2009) analyzed the course descriptions, goals, objectives, and other descriptors to determine if the courses were preparing teachers to eliminate educational inequalities and provide a satisfactory education for all students. He found that the courses tended to celebrate diversity instead of honoring a social commitment to educational equity and justice: “most of the syllabi failed to frame multicultural education as a political movement concerned with social justice, as an approach for comprehensive reform, as a critical analysis of power and privilege, or as a process for eliminating educational inequalities” (Gorski, 2009, p. 316; Sleeter, 2017). If teacher certification programs fail to provide a meaningful multicultural education course, the racialized disparity within American schools continues to exist and is perpetuated, continuing to value the white student and devalue the Student of Color.

### **20th-Century Historical Context**

While *Brown v. Board of Education* altered the very fabric of American education, a slightly lesser known, but equally important case, *Briggs v. Elliott*, preceded and established precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education*. As the research for this dissertation was conducted in South Carolina, it is significant to discuss *Briggs v. Elliott*,

a South Carolina desegregation lawsuit, for its relevance to the history and framing of the location of this action research investigation. “*Briggs*, not *Brown*, was the foundation for abolishing separate but equal schools” (Cook, 2004, p. 7). The original lawsuit concerned lack of equitable funding provided between Black and white schools, but upon the urging of Judge Waring, Thurgood Marshall altered the original lawsuit. “Waring believed that separation and segregation according to race was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Allen, 2019, p. 444), thus establishing precedent for the U.S. Supreme Court three years later upon hearing *Brown*. “The *Brown* court agreed with the *Briggs* dissenting judge and found that segregation of children in public school solely on the basis of race, even though physical facilities and other tangible factors may be equal, does deprive Black children equal educational opportunities” (Allen, 2019, p. 445). When *Briggs* went before the U.S. Supreme Court, it was bundled with four other school segregation cases, and was known as *Brown v. Board of Education*. While the schools in South Carolina were the leaders in desegregation, this does not mean that the state became integrated (Cook, 2004).

The first-time racialized education was discussed on a national level was during the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, three years after the South Carolina *Briggs*’ ruling which did not desegregate schools but required more equitable funding between Black and white schools (Allen, 2019). “Just as the Civil War caused Americans to confront the ugly reality of slavery, so too did *Brown* inspire Americans to confront its undemocratic system of education” (Van Delinder, 2004, p. 2). While this was not the first lawsuit brought before state and national supreme courts on discrimination based on race, *Brown v. Board of Education* Chief Justice Earl Warren declared “separation of the

racism by law is inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional” (Brittain, 2004, p. 30), forcing all Americans to confront the ugly reality that a divided society, enforcing undemocratic social practices, is not an equal society (Van Delinder, 2004).

Subsequently, the U.S. Supreme Court opened the flood gates in opposition to school desegregation lawsuits and triggered a chain reaction that led to the birth of the Civil Rights Movement.

While *Brown v. Board of Education* began the school desegregation process on the grounds that separation based on race was unconstitutional, the verdict ultimately served the interests of white people in a tumultuous time in U.S. history. The United States was experiencing strained international relations with its allies as a result of the Cold War and a desegregation verdict protected the image of white people in America as a winning ideological struggle (Aronson et al., 2020; Crowley & Smith, 2020). The self-preservation of white people served as interest convergence, one of the tenets of critical race theory, where gains for BIPOC individuals are only made when it would somehow benefit white lives (Aronson et al., 2020). White elites, representative of white middle and upper class, only granted privileges to subjugated groups when it protected and served white interest. Advances for marginalized groups had to also “secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important” (Crowley & Smith, 2020, p. 13) for white people. While interest convergence created the conditions for the *Brown* verdict, it did not lead to lasting racial progress or coalition between white and BIPOC lives (Crowley & Smith, 2020).

The aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* was a universal policy of racial tolerance and understanding (Van Delinder, 2004). While white America projected an image of racial tolerance—not acceptance—and understanding, many historically accurate books from the era offer vivid descriptions of the struggles of desegregation. For instance, Irby (2014) noted that, “during the school desegregation movement most Whites feared that mixing would lead to a world in which Black men might challenge White domination of life” (p. 784). This mind-set held by white Americans was created by unfounded fear, and it continuously supported and enforced white supremacist ideologies.

The power of the Supreme Court to mandate integration was undermined by the depths of the systemic racial domination in America, and this mandate served to “only facilitate more brutal aggressions and more transgressive state laws” (Payne, 2004, p. 5). Political imagery from the time was sprinkled with Black protagonists, such as Norman Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With*, and Black lynchings, such as *Murder in Mississippi*, depicting the civil unrest in a country experiencing increases in hate crimes and Klu Klux Klan, KKK, memberships at alarming rates in response to forced desegregation.

The “all deliberate speed” at which integration was forced by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, touted as progress, led to white school officials closing many of the Black schools and laying off a disproportionate percentage of Black teachers and Black administrators (Brittain, 2004; Tosolt, 2020). Such actions effectively removed Black leadership from the school systems, putting the education of Black youth and Students of



Color, at the hands of white educators and administrators. This only further inflated the sense of white supremacy and preserved the permanence of racism in the United States (DiAngelo, 2006; Sleeter, 2017; Tosolt, 2020). “One consequence of the elimination of segregated schooling system was a wrenching of control over Black children’s education out of Black communities and more firmly into White ones” (Tosolt, 2020, p. 779). In the 15 to 16 years needed for *Brown v. Board of Education* to fully enforce the desegregation of public schools, the United States effectively removed an entire generation of Black teachers from the classroom, a political move that crippled the diversity of American educators and has subsequently hindered the success of the country’s racially diverse youth (Brittain, 2004, Sleeter, 2017; Tosolt, 2020).

While schools became desegregated, living patterns and housing became more segregated. Today, there is more racial and ethnic segregation in school zoning and housing patterns than existed in 1954, during the era of the *Brown* ruling (Brittain, 2004). Americans are now living a more segregated life than ever before (DiAngelo, 2011). This new de facto segregation, resulted in a phenomenon known as “white flight,” the fleeing of white middle class Americans from the cities to the suburbs, leaving the poor and often Black students behind (Brittain, 2004). In addition to white flight, families who remained in the cities began enrolling their children in private school, effectively removing funds and racial diversity from the remaining public schools (Allen, 2019). The private school industry by virtue of financial resources discriminated against Black students and was a direct response to mandated integration. Both private and city school districts required higher fees and taxes effectively eliminating the poor from attending, another example of de facto segregation (Brittain, 2004; Tosolt, 2020).

In addition to educational practices, racialized housing practices provide a legal barrier between urban and suburban schools, the color line separates urban, mostly People of Color, poor districts from affluent, disproportionately white, suburban districts (Brittian, 2004). Although Black and white communities lived in separate, segregated communities prior to the 1950s, the neighborhoods “were not contiguous and as concentrated as in contemporary times” (Martin & Varner, 2017, p.3). As there is no legal remedy to de facto segregation, there are no efforts being made to bridge the gap between educational experiences for students (Allen, 2019). The failed integration of schools further established white supremacy within a country that has repeatedly forced its white ideologies and dominance over People of Color. In a system that eliminated Black educators, the teaching force has remained predominantly white and continues to get whiter. It is projected that 83% of educators are White and female, with limited interactions and experiences with People of Color (DiAngelo, 2006); this number is continuing to rise as Students of Color graduate from teacher preparation programs at a lower rate (Sleeter, 2017). “The cultural mismatch between predominately White teachers and their students of color is significant” (Martin & Varner, 2017, p. 2) and is exacerbated when White educators live in suburban environments juxtaposed against the communities in which their students reside (Martin & Varner, 2017).

While many have fought de facto segregation, there is no legal remedy to the unequal educational opportunities. *Sheff v. O’Neill* and *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No.1* sued current segregated school systems; however, state supreme courts continually sided with the state, allowing for legalized segregation to remain (Brittian, 2004). These efforts of affluent, predominantly white community

members to manipulate resources ensured that their children receive the full benefit of a higher tax base and better resources, further lending itself to racial disparity within the American education system.

In South Carolina, the most recent efforts for predominantly Student of Color school districts to establish equitable division of funds, *Abbeville v. South Carolina*, was an attempt to have the South Carolina state funding formula recalculated as it violated the South Carolina Constitution's Education Clause, Equal Protection clause, and Education Finance Act of 1977 (Allen, 2019). The original *Abbeville* case was a conglomerate of 40 school districts, 25 individually named parents, and 26 students in South Carolina seeking equitable division of state educational funds for poorer, predominantly Black school districts (Allen, 2019). The original case was filed in 1994, and in 2017, after 23 years of being tied up in legislative red tape, in a 3–2 ruling, the South Carolina Supreme Court dismissed the case on a technical violation of separation of powers (Allen, 2019). Although *Abbeville County School District v. South Carolina* and its two predecessors, *Briggs v. Elliott* and *Richland County v. Campbell*, produced several new education bills, “rural, low-wealth, mostly Black school districts are still waiting for a long-term trustworthy solution and commitment from the state of South Carolina” (Allen, 2019, p. 450) to ensure all students receive equitable access to educational opportunities.

The time that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an era of great change and hostility. Very few Black teachers remained employed in the American school systems and white Americans were fleeing from the cities to suburbia (Brittian, 2004). This period gave way to overwhelming colorblindness,

pretending not to see the color of a person and thus effectively denying how it effects their daily life, and the next major racialized political hit for American schools was just around the corner (DiAngelo, 2011, Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Reagan-era Republicans were the next enforcers of the racism still plaguing the American schools. The tough-on-crime initiatives of the 1980s and the subsequent Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 resulted in state-level zero-tolerance policies for disciplinary infractions and systematically punished Students of Color more severely for the same offense as white students, inflating the racialized schools-to-prison pipeline (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Zero-tolerance policies are aligned with the tough-on-crime mindset, which criminalizes school misbehavior. This belief is rooted in the ideology that removing students from school will effectively maintain the integrity of the learning environment for the remaining students (Yang et al., 2018, p. 317). Students of Color, specifically Black students, are twice as likely to be suspended for minor offenses than their white counterparts (Grace & Nelson, 2018; Yang et al., 2018). Surprisingly, “while violence and delinquency have been on the decline, punitive discipline has increase” (Grace & Nelson, 2018, p. 670). Students who are suspended and expelled disproportionately identify as BIPOC, report low acceptance with their school, and are more likely to perceive their school environment as discriminatory and teachers as unsupportive (Bleyaert, 2009; Yang et al. 2018).

The zero-tolerance policies effectively allow teachers and administrators to continually reinforce the racial bias within the schools. Teachers are more likely to jump to faulty conclusions and misinterpret student interactions and responses as behavior

violations the more a student does not look like the teacher (Bleyaert, 2009). This biased school management is a racialized response from teachers, which has a negative impact on school experiences and outcomes for Students of Color (Grace & Nelson, 2019). The disproportionate treatment of students based on race is directly linked to “entrenched values that have shaped American social systems and institutions. As difficult as it may be for educators to accept, ‘public education is hardwired-consciously or not-to perpetuate the inequalities that children are born into’” (Bleyaert, 2009, p. 2; Indiana University School of Education, 2020). This suggests a deeper pattern of institutional racism, fueled by zero-tolerance policies, is systematically occurring across the country based on a racial profiling (Bleyaert, 2009). BIPOC students feel a perpetual and constant Black-man-versus-society conflict that burdened their perceptions and expectations of others (Grace & Nelson, 2018). In a small qualitative study of Black males in Louisiana, Grace and Nelson (2019) found Black males experienced microaggressions at regular occurrences during school and consequently these aggressions caused school disengagement. Teacher perception functioned as a barrier between students and their academic success, “in this context, racism acts as a form of school pushout because it alienates Black male students” (Grace & Nelson, 2019, p. 673).

The patterns of institutional racism produced by the zero-tolerance policies are central to the prison pipeline phenomenon and exacerbate the racial insensitivity among teachers (Grace & Nelson, 2019). “The critical shortage of Black teachers in general and the shortage of Black male teachers in particular contribute to the problem of cultural insensitivity and the substitution of zero-tolerance policies for stricter classroom discipline” (Berlowitz et al., 2017, p. 11). To overcome the cultural insensitivity

pandemic that is plaguing American schools, teacher education reformation is needed to develop anti-racist understanding and awareness within teachers (Berlowitz et al., 2017).

### **Pre-Service and Practicing Teachers**

The introductory efforts to combat whiteness and systematic racism in American schools begins in teacher education; however, pre-service teacher programs are lacking the ability to prevail in anti-racist teaching and overcoming the systematic whiteness of education (Aronson et al., 2020). Although teacher education programs market themselves with an orientation towards social justice and culturally responsive pedagogy, they are unable to overcome the dominance of whiteness in education, producing predominantly white cohorts of teachers. (Sleeter, 2017). “Addressing racism in teacher education is a process of systemic and cultural change rather than a short-term ‘fixing’ of a problem” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 164). Sleeter (2017) investigated teacher preparatory programs through a critical race theory lens and found most colleges and universities offer minimal multicultural preparations for those in teacher preparation programs. The majority of faculty within higher education programs are white, and thus any changes to curriculum need to align with white interest to gain any support (Sleeter, 2017). This alignment of interests is known interest convergence, another tenant of CRT. Most often, diversity is broken off into a separate course, limiting the holistic approach to teacher preparation for diverse schools and student populations (Gorski, 2009; Sleeter, 2017). Teacher education programs need to be reorganized to include social justice-minded professors who recognize the long-term need for reform and can incorporate these changes into all levels and courses of teacher preparation programs.

While the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) sets standards for multicultural education, it was never intended as one course but instead was meant to be woven throughout teacher education (Sleeter, 2017; Tosolt, 2020). When antiracism is bundled into a singular multicultural education course, white teachers become defensive, assert lack of racism, claim colorblindness, and deny their own privilege (Tosolt, 2020). Tosolt (2020) found all these mechanisms were deployed defense tactics to “allow teacher education students to deny the impact of race on the educational landscape and to support the framework of white supremacy in their future teaching practices” (p. 776).

Aronson et al. (2020) stated, “It is well documented that white PSTs [pre-service teachers] struggle and often resist conversations that center race, racism, and Whiteness in the classroom. Through this resistance, Whiteness is maintained and is displayed through many forms” (p. 304). Aronson et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative document/narrative analysis using multi-step coding; 57 majority white female participants (n = 57) over the course of three semesters shared their reflection at the conclusion of a critical literacy workshop. At the conclusion of the study, while pre-service teachers did acknowledge that the history they had received in school had been whitewashed, they also displayed white fragility when “PSTs [pre-service teachers] placed the responsibility for what they do not know on external factors” (Aronson et al., 2020, pp. 310–311). Students showed promise in their ability to recognize their ignorance and take responsibility for inquiry and behavior modification, however, they “were more focused on being polite with each other than actually engaging in the messiness of self-critique, or critique of each other” (Aronson et al., 2020, p. 315). While many pre-service

teachers did learn from the workshop, there was concern about the success of the workshop in transforming teacher practice (Aronson et al., 2020).

As the attitudes and behaviors of teachers are a driving force of institutionalized racism within the schools, educators need to be aware of their racial bias and be motivated to alter the fabric of their interactions with students. Teachers are often among the group most reluctant to acknowledge white supremacy. Consequently, this thinking informs all aspects of culture, including what we think, how we learn, and how we are taught (Banner, 2007). “Teacher expectations heavily influence teacher-student interactions and are thus also a contributing factor to potential outcomes of students” (Grace & Nelson, 2019, p. 669). Investigating whiteness within teacher thinking and actions might spark meaningful professional development discussions among teacher groups that may not always mirror their student’s diversity (Banner, 2007). The white classroom teacher must learn to become the “cultural broker,” versed in recognizing and articulating the influences of whiteness in order to promote an environment that is psychologically beneficial for all students, regardless of color (DiAngelo, 2006).

Understanding that BIPOC students have a very different classroom experience than their white counterparts is essential for white teachers (DiAngelo, 2006). Describing and addressing whiteness within the classroom allows white teachers to identify how they have internalized racism, often colorblind racism, and address its manifestation within the classroom; these enlightenments can allow teachers to recognize how their racialized preferences have been hindering their ability to teach all students (DiAngelo, 2006).



Thorsteinson (2018) suggested using self-directed learning as a model to examine individualized racial education and to “locate, interrogate, and decenter my whiteness in the classroom” (p. 38). By utilizing autoethnographic methods, Thorsteinson (2018) documented her teaching and classroom experiences through personal journal, peer consultation, and a public website. Conducting classes using more self-directed learning devalued critical whiteness and removed the white teacher as the course lead on racial topics (Thorsteinson, 2018). Students became more actively engaged in the self-directed learning; however, self-directed learning needed to be used with caution, as it could actually impede learning (Thorsteinson, 2018). While autoethnographic methods could be utilized in other classrooms, the course evaluation feedback and journaling would not be applicable to another individual, even a white female making the results from this study ungeneralizable (Thorsteinson, 2018).

The permeance and pervasiveness of racism among practicing white teachers affects all aspects of the classroom culture. Racialized responses by teachers are only exacerbated by tracking, where students are sorted and taught based on academic ability. Tracking disproportionately places BIPOC students in lower academic classes, even when ability demonstrates that they should be in higher classes (Bleyaert, 2009). In addition to zero-tolerance policies, Students of Color lack access to the most engaging and relevant curriculum and teachers, particularly in high school, which is traced back to tracking procedures that began in the elementary grades (Bleyaert, 2009).

Grissom and Redding (2016) found that Black students with non-Black teachers were systematically less likely to receive gifted services, particularly in reading, and have

a lower likelihood of being assigned to gifted programs when academically qualified, which diverts gifted services and funds from the students who would benefit the most. The data used in Grissom and Redding came from the restricted-use version of the ECLS-K (n = 14,280); a quantitative multiple regression analysis was used to analyze student data after variables (gifted program, race, school and teacher characteristics, etc.) had been coded. Since teacher discretion was the primary mechanism for identifying students for gifted academic programs, “education leaders need not wait for greater teacher workforce diversity to address the issue” (Grissom & Redding, 2016, p. 15), and instead must enhance training for practicing teachers to overcome racialized tracking practices that result in bias judgement and expectation.

Further, Sleeter (2017) found that “black students achieved better with a black teacher who failed the Praxis than the same students would achieve with a white teacher who passed it” (p. 161). This suggests that it is not the program or content knowledge that makes a teacher and their students successful but the ability of a teacher to connect with their class and develop a culturally relevant environment.

### **Need for Practicing Teacher Research**

Students of Color are overwhelmingly taught by white teachers, reflecting a lack of diversity in the teacher workforce (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Grissom and Redding (2016) found white students are taught by white teachers 95% of the time in their K–5 years, while BIPOC students average a racial congruence with their teacher only 17% of the time. This means white students are almost always guaranteed a white teacher, while only one in five BIPOC students will ever have a BIPOC teacher, leaving BIPOC

education in the hands of the racially dominant educator. For practicing teachers to interrupt the permanence of racism and to ensure access to an equitable education for all students, teachers must first racialize themselves, recognizing their whiteness and the effects it has on their students (DiAngelo, 2006, 2018). Failing to name whiteness and its privilege continues to preserve its location, preserving the colorblind ideology of the teacher, white students, and classroom environment that has been constructed (DiAngelo, 2006). There is currently very limited research that reports on practicing teacher beliefs, positionalities, and purposes, which makes it difficult to design professional development opportunities and courses in recertification programs (Aronson et al., 2020). There is still “a surprising lack of research documenting implementations of critical whiteness pedagogies in school contexts” (Tanner, 2020, p. 231), with much of what is written framed around McIntosh’s (1989) white privilege framework, which is believed to oversimplify the effects of racism (Tanner, 2020).

The colorblind ideology regularly seen within practicing teachers needs to be addressed. Colorblind ideology tends to benefit those already in power, defending and extending white racial advantage, and spurring white privilege (Gillborn, 2019). While color-blind ideology is portrayed as occupying the moral high ground, successfully silencing any racialized disputes perpetuates white privilege by silencing critical racial discussion (Gillborn, 2019).

As a tenet of critical race theory, the permeance of racism in American school teachers affects the daily running of the schools, student successes, and life outcomes. Critical and serious consideration needs to be given to the role of race and racism within

the educational system. The failure of schools and practicing educators to engage in meaningful dialogue surrounding race and racism is an ongoing affair that needs to be addressed lest we continue to reiterate the whitewashing of American schools to the disadvantage of our Students of Color (Aronson et al. 2020).

While there is no magic pedagogical bullet that can fatally wound the oppressive nature of whiteness and white racism in education, work can be done to overcome the current cultural knowledge gap (Gillborn, 2019). Since practicing teachers are the forefront of education and the individuals who most interact with students, it is imperative that they examine and reflect on their whiteness and its inherent privilege (Gillborn, 2019). Critical race theory and critical whiteness studies address the social justice of deconstructing white racism through examining privilege, power, and bias (Matias et al, 2016). Encouraging teachers to engage in self-study facilitates reflection on the white supremacist systems operating within education (Tanner, 2020; Thorsteinson, 2018). By reflecting on their white teacher behaviors, these educators can identify elements of racism within themselves that extend to their classrooms and classroom pedagogy which is limiting the success of all students. While there is extensive research on pre-service teacher whiteness through a critical race theory framework, very little research exists on current teachers' self-reflections on whiteness (Aronson et al., 2020; Tanner, 2020). This action research study was designed to investigate practicing teacher whiteness by encouraging self-reflection, thus building on the foundation established by experts in the field and previous research conducted at pre-service teaching programs.

Educational policies enacted in America designed to bridge the achievement gap have systematically contributed to the disadvantage of BIPOC students with an “ever-expanding racial disparity that have negatively impacted minoritized groups, especially African-American children” (de Silva et al., 2018, p. 23). In order to begin repairing the damage caused by *Brown v. Board*’s failed integration, we need to better train teachers, lest our silence continues to reinforce the optimism and dominant narrative that is being projected (Aronson et al., 2020). As Tanner (2020) found, there is still “a surprising lack of research documenting implementations of critical whiteness pedagogies in school contexts” (p. 231). Until teachers are willing to break down the barriers and inherent privileges of whiteness, the pursuit of racial justice and anti-racism in American schools will continue to evade our students (Matias & Mackey, 2015). As McIntosh (1989) stated so eloquently, “this is not such a free country; one’s life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own” (p. 12). As educators it is a moral and societal responsibility to equalize the opportunities provided to our students, encourage their successes, and disengage in systematic racism for the benefit of all our students.

### **Summary**

As Sleeter (2018) questioned, are educators born or are they made? Regardless of the answer, while there is some inherent talent associated with being a teacher, the role of an effective teacher is to be a lifelong learner, always trying to improve in different areas (Sleeter, 2018). Sleeter continues to develop her skills as a facilitator in multicultural education classes and encourages other educators, particularly white educators, to overcome the white supremacy of which they benefit and learn to engaging in culturally

relevant pedagogy and addressing racism within the schools. White teachers must realize the normalized views of race and society, of which they have been indoctrinated, are not the views of all; the white perspective is not objective nor a representation of reality (DiAngelo, 2011). The sense of white supremacy is developed and coded as power and supremacy as early as preschool; with high school teachers, who are the participants of this research, the racial coded foundations have already been implanted and a sense of belonging and exclusion already established (DiAngelo, 2011).

Often teachers are among the professional group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white supremacist thinking informs every aspect of culture, including the way we teach and learn (Banner, 2007). As stated in the problem of practice, white educators need to become more reflective of their whiteness and the implications it has on all students. Research shows the racialized history of education as well as the need for practicing teachers to lean into the discomfort of authentic racial engagement instead of retreat, perpetuating the cycle that holds racism in its place (DiAngelo, 2011). By racializing their whiteness through reflection, white teachers can cultivate culturally relevant pedagogical classroom environments. The large body of research with pre-service teachers serves as a foundation through which to explore whiteness in practicing teachers. Therefore, this investigation aimed to foster reflection and collaborative discussion through a book study. As the results from pre-service teachers was mixed, often fostering awareness but with little change, this study aimed to have a positive impact on cultivating an awareness and desire to alter classroom climates for a more culturally relevant pedagogical outlook.

The following chapter, Chapter 3, will present the methodology of the study, including research design, participant criteria and sample, data collection, and mixed methods data analysis methods.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The intent of this action research case study was to discern and examine the whiteness of white female teachers and their ability to teach culturally relevant pedagogy. At the time of conducting this research, “whiteness” was the societal structures that continually reproduce white privilege and what it meant to be white in a society that constantly reinforces systematic racism and racial oppression of BIPOC.

I explored the whiteness of educators through a theoretical framework supported by critical race theory and critical whiteness studies. Specifically, this study analyzed and explored how critical race theory and critical whiteness studies create a theoretical framework for educators to change racial discrimination within themselves and their classrooms as they both function within a societal system meant to uphold the structures of whiteness and routinely reproduce them. The research questions were answered using a mixed methods action research design with three different data measures, in addition to a comprehensive literature review previously discussed in Chapter 2.

#### **Research Approach**

According to Mertler (2020), action research is conducted by teachers, administrators, and others involved in the education setting with an interest in the teaching and learning process. Mertler (2020) continued by saying the purpose of action research is for information gathering on how a specific school operates, how students are



taught, and how students learn. A fundamental pillar of action research is that it is conducted by teachers for themselves (Mertler, 2020; Mills, 2018). Mills (2018) required action research to “enhances the lives of children ... but action research can also enhance the lives of professionals” (p. 17).

This research is participatory with other in-service educators. I conducted research *with* others, not doing research *on* others, setting it apart from traditional scholarly research endeavors (Beaulieu, 2013). While I hoped aspects of this research would be generalizable, the main objective was to promote white teacher racial awareness of whiteness in themselves and their school, reflect on the implications of whiteness for students in the hope to improve student learning, and cultivate change in classroom instruction to be more culturally relevant pedagogically (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The focus of the case study was not on whether “the inquiry’s finds can be generalized to other settings but rather on whether the findings can be useful for improving their [practicing teachers] own practice” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 49). This action research study was targeted at helping educators identify and examine their whiteness and the implications it had on keeping unequal power relations in place (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

As I participated in the research and the key stakeholders were co-investigators, an action research study was more appropriate than a traditional dissertation (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Action research is participatory in nature, is founded in democratic impulse, and contributes to social science while promoting social change (Kinsler, 2010). My active participation with study participants focusing on racism and whiteness in

education provided a sound argument for action research over a traditional dissertation intervention.

This action research was emancipatory and transformative in nature. Kinsler (2010) suggested an emancipatory mindset to “connect the personal and the political, and to transform situations so as to overcome felt alienation, dissatisfactions, ideological distortion, and the injustices of oppression and domination” (p. 175). The process of action and learning is often used to assess existing social norms, values, and assumptions, to understand how they are morphed by power and function as a catalyst for social change (Ivankova, 2015). The drive for social justice reform was the objective of this research and is often difficult for in-service, practicing teachers to acquire through university-initiated research/practice. As a result, researcher in collaboration with study participants approach was more beneficial for practicing teachers and encouraged openness to the intervention discussions and methods (Kinsler, 2010).

### **Methods**

A mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data sources was used. A more specific form of mixed methods, one of convergent design, was used. A convergent mixed-methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative data analysis so they can be compared or combined to address the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The basic idea is to compare the two results with the intent of obtaining a more complete understanding of a problem to validate one set of findings with the other, or to determine if participants respond in a similar way if they check

quantitative predetermined scales and if they are asked open-ended qualitative questions. (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 65)

A convergent mixed-methods approach was selected for a variety of reasons. As the researcher, I have experience with both quantitative and qualitative research methods and found value to using both measures for this study. Additionally, using this design, bringing together qualitative and quantitative measures, improves the strength of the research findings while minimizing the weaknesses (Creswell & Clark, 2018). These varied perspectives and analyses of the problem of practice and subsequent research questions provided a complete understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

### **Research Setting**

The research for this study was conducted at a single, rural high school in South Carolina. “The purpose of a case study is often to understand some abstract phenomenon or the interrelationship of a set of constructs” (Creamer, 2018). The phenomenon of whiteness in education was being examined at one specific location, and while the results of the study are not isolated to this one location, the objective was to capture an in-depth description and analysis of whiteness at one small, rural high school.

The case study was a smaller high school, classified as 2A, graduating a senior class of fewer than 200 students. Each faculty department within the school was composed of approximately six to eight educators, with the sample of study participants varying across departments. The case study was the smallest high school in a large school district. The school district varied from large, suburban upper middle-class sprawl to rural

poverty. The case study was the smallest, most rural, and most economically disadvantaged within the district. In fact, next school year, the school's poverty levels will have them classified as a Title I school, where over 40% of the student population come from homes below the financial threshold for poverty. Currently, all the feeder schools, elementary and middle, for this high school are all classified as Title I, with the high school being the last to complete the required application to receive the federal Title I funding.

In addition to being rurally located and receiving Title I funding due to high levels of poverty, the case study location was politically polarized. Following the 2020 election, many students began to display "Trump 2024," "Not my President," and "Let's go, Brandon" memorabilia. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the enforcement of the mask mandate was met with much hostility among students, parents, and community members. There was extremely limited and often zero tolerance for individuals who shared a different mindset. These individuals were often publicly ridiculed and ostracized, as I experienced first-hand. The extreme political polarization of the community had an intense impact on the socialization of teachers and students. Teachers who tried to counter the community narrative were often silenced out of intimidation or ridicule by parents who were more than willing to complain to administration and make derogatory postings on social media.

### **Sample Participants**

Study participants included white female teachers in one small, rural high school in the Southeast. The optimal treatment sample included five to ten white female teachers within the school (Ivankova, 2015). A list of all of the school's teachers was obtained

through the phone directory that was given to teachers at the beginning of the school year and periodically updated throughout the year as teachers entered and left the school. After an examination of the complete teacher phone list, teachers were eliminated from the potential participant pool based on gender, experience, and racial identification. As a newer teacher to the school, I did not know the background information of all teachers. When there was a question about a teacher's tenure at the school and teaching experience, a veteran teacher with 12 years of experience at the case study location who did not participate in the research study was asked about individual credentials. The remaining 21 white female teachers were individually given a letter of invitation.

This sampling method was purposeful to include individuals who were insiders to the whiteness phenomenon, thus the sample requirement to self-identify as white. Study participants possessed four sampling criteria: white, female, fully licensed by the South Carolina Department of Education, and classroom teachers with three or more years of classroom teaching experience. Teaching experience provided a depth of knowledge and more familiarity to the constructs of the classroom and the ability to reflect on classroom practices more deeply. White females composed most of the current teaching force within American schools and the case study's location. Eighty percent of the student population identified as white, and an overwhelming 93% of the faculty population identified as white at the case study location.

While the case study's teacher demographics did not mirror the student population, this phenomenon was not isolated. Most American educators are white and only about half of student populations are also white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For the goal of the research questions, homogenous purposeful sampling was

utilized. White female teachers were intentionally selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon, whiteness, being explored and investigated (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Within purposeful sampling, the subsampling method of homogenous sampling, “selecting individuals who have membership in a subgroup with distinctive characteristics” (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 176) was utilized, making the investigation a homogenous purposeful sample. By purposefully sampling a group of educators most representative of the American educator population, the insight gleaned from the COBRAS survey, focus groups, and administrator interviews improved the case study’s generalizability and provided a richer understanding of the typical classroom experience for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

As the research topic of whiteness is an extremely sensitive topic that is rarely discussed openly, it was imperative for participants to be made as comfortable as possible to promote meaningful dialogue, especially when exploring potentially controversial viewpoints (Ivankova, 2015). Excluding males and BIPOC individuals from the study improved the reliability of the emergent focus group themes by reducing added social constructs, gender roles, power, and sexism, which would influence the research findings. While future studies could include white males and BIPOC populations, for this investigation to be most representative of the case study’s location and reduce other social constructs that influence study findings, I chose to limit the pool of potential participants to fully licensed white female teachers with three or more years of classroom instruction experience.

Administrators and other school personnel were not invited to participate, as the social structure of the discussion could change. Administrators were in a position of

power within the school. Allowing administration to participate in data collection had the potential to alter responses and stifle open conversation among participants. “It is important to observe the issues of power within a focus group and ensure the participants have equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 203).

Removing administrators and other school personnel from the purposive homogenous sample aided to equalizing the power of individuals in the focus group, promoting meaningful examination of whiteness and the implications within the classroom setting.

When given the letter of invitation, the teachers were told the duration of the study, a brief explanation of the purpose, focus of the research, and informed that for their participation, they would be receiving at no cost a copy of the intervention book, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*

Potential participants were also told they would randomly be assigned to either a control or treatment group. Participants in the treatment group received the book at the beginning of the intervention and those in the control group received the book after completing the post-test survey. Participants were given the option to request an audiobook version of the text; none chose this option.

All participants, treatment and control, self-identified as white, female, fully licensed by the South Carolina Department of Education, and had three or more years of teaching experience. The participants were not isolated to one specific subject area but consist of a broad range of classroom educators from STEM, humanities, special education, and the arts courses.

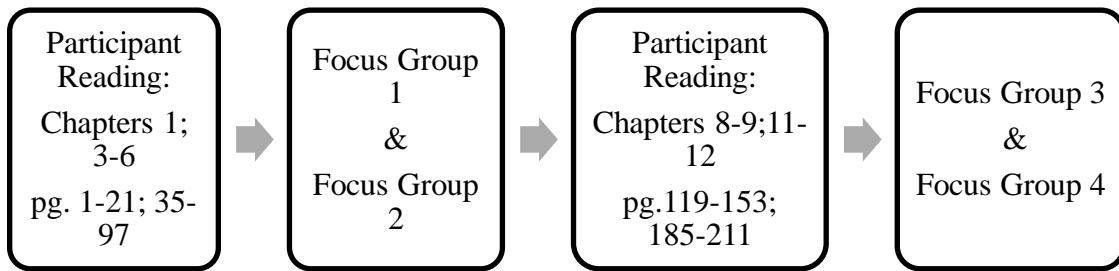
Individuals not selected to participate in the study, BIPOC faculty and staff members and white males, were told there might be future studies in which they could participate if they so desire. In addition, a copy of the reading material, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, was made available for their use through the school library if they would like to read the material as well.

### **Intervention**

Prior to administering an intervention plan to treatment group participants, all participating teachers completed the CoBRAS survey, more detail to be provided in a later section in this chapter in the data collection methods section. The CoBRAS survey was then readministered to all participants at the end of the intervention to see if quantitative, measurable change occurred in treatment participants.

For the intervention, a series of assigned reading and discussion groups were conducted to increase the understanding of whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege. The focus of the reading and discussion groups was on recognizing the racialized privilege, supremacy, and unconscious bias operating within daily life and subsequently the classroom. Each assigned reading in Sensoy and DiAngelo's *Is Everyone Really Equal?* was approximately 75–90 pages and occurred twice (see Figure 3.1). While there was social justice value to the entire book, this research study focused on whiteness, and study participants were only required to read the portions of the book that focused on racial forms of societal oppression and white supremacy.





**Figure 3.1**  
*Treatment/Intervention Plan*

Participants were given the flexibility to read at their own pace, with some participants taking the full two weeks between discussion groups to read their material and some reading the entire assignment during a planning period the day of discussion group. Group members were encouraged to read the chapter discussion questions and reflect prior to attending discussion groups.

After the first assigned reading, participants were given an option to attend two different discussion groups, whichever fit best with their schedules (see Figure 3.1). All discussion groups occurred after school hours and could potentially conflict with personal schedules. Participants were required to attend one of the first discussion groups, Session 1 or Session 2, prior to beginning their second reading. After completing their second reading they could then attend Session 3 or Session 4. Participants were not locked-in to any discussion group rotation.

Discussion groups began using prewritten discussion questions from the assigned text, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*. I, the researcher, did not write the discussion questions. I understood that my whiteness could project in biased wording and writing of the study group questions, thus altering the trajectory and focus of the study group. The discussion questions were gleaned from the discussion questions written in *Is Everyone Really*

*Equal?*, which were already vetted for reliability, validity, and language context. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) wrote their recommended discussion questions at the end of each chapter to coincide with the topics just read. See Appendix A for the list of questions used to begin each discussion group.

These questions were used to start conversation and redirect conversation when the discussion veered off topic. The discussion groups began with Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) prescribed discussion questions, with the ultimate flow of the discussion taking the form and direction of the participants' choosing. These discussions often digressed into specific racialized topics, as members asked additional open-ended questions of each other and pointed out racial fallacies in each other's speech.

Sensoy and DiAngelo's book was selected for the study group for several reasons. First, the work came recommended by my dissertation chair, an expert in his field, who used the book in a course he taught at the University of South Carolina. In addition, Sensoy and DiAngelo are well respected and with valued perspectives, "given the authors' extensive teaching experience and encounter with resistance to social justice approaches across a broad range of public schools, private institutions, and postsecondary degree programs" (Hale, 2016, p. 226).

This book was a quality resource for teachers seeking knowledge on assumed social power and provided the tools to critically examine those social constructs. "The main goal of the book is to nurture understanding of critical social justice literacy: to help individuals recognize their own biases and positionality within a system of unequal social

power...to offer paths for action in response to justice issues” (Journal of Peace Education, 2014, pp. 246-247).

While the entire book was longer than what several participants wanted to read, 217 pages total, the language was accessible with clear explanations of key concepts supplying a thorough glossary for readers, reflection questions at the end of every chapter, and “boxes” throughout to draw the reader’s attention to key terms, previously explained ideas, and alternative standpoints (McLean, 2013).

### **Data Collection Methods**

The Color Blind Racial Attitude Survey (CoBRAS) was the data source for the quantitative part of this study. This survey was needed to answer two research goals:

1. What changes, if any, are made to teacher whiteness when examined?
2. What are teacher responses toward examining their whiteness?

To accomplish these goals, the CoBRAS was used as a pre- and post-test survey to the intervention.

The pre-test data of the CoBRAS whiteness survey was coded and analyzed as specified by the survey creators. The instrument was composed of 26 Likert-scaled questions with several items reverse graded—worded in a negative direction to reduce potential response bias (Neville et al., 2000). A higher finalized score correlated to higher internalized whiteness.

The test instrument, CoBRAS survey, had been previously tested for internal reliability and validity, reducing the need for researcher creation and pilot of a new test instrument. While the CoBRAS instrument was created for clinical psychology purposes,

education is a related field, and the test instrument had been effectively administered in education. Sperling and Kuhn (2016) had previously used the test instrument within higher education settings, finding CoBRAS “adds to the growing literature supporting its utility in the prediction of policy attitudes and increases its utility as a psychometrically sound instrument in education and related social sciences” (p. 180).

While the creation of CoBRAS was not intended for education or educator purposes, the previous findings in both psychology and education made CoBRAS an ideal instrument to be used for this study.

### **Qualitative Measures**

The data sources that were utilized in the qualitative phase were semi-structured focus group discussions and open-ended administrator interviews. The qualitative strengths of the study through focus groups provided a voice and narrative to study participants that could not be achieved using quantitative measures. These qualitative measures were needed to answer the following research goals:

2. What are teacher responses toward examining their whiteness?
3. What are the classroom implications, if any, of examined whiteness and how does this impact teaching those who are culturally different?

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group was a desirable qualitative method to bring together a representative group to “explore their perceptions of a problem of interest or experiences with the studies issue. A group discussion format stimulates participants to exchange their views, motives, and feelings and is particularly useful for exploring controversial

viewpoints” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 202). Given the nature of the purpose and research questions in this study, it was projected controversial viewpoints would be examined and the need for exchanged viewpoints was necessary to analyze teacher responses to their whiteness.

### **Administrator Interviews**

As focus groups were necessary to understand whiteness as a societal construct, interviews provided depth and understanding about experiences and individual views on whiteness (Ivankova, 2015). Most of education occurs in the confines of a classroom with only one teacher; understanding the projection of teacher whiteness in a classroom was best obtained through administrator interviews. While interviews could be time consuming to conduct and transcribe for analysis, the depth of knowledge gained was invaluable (Ivankova, 2015). To analyze teacher projection of whiteness, I needed the opportunity to obtain a third-party perspective to understand if the nuances of whiteness within the study participants had changed and if these changes were being projected within the school.

While student interviews were a possibility, there were additional hurdles to overcome. Students were considered an at-risk population as addressed in the University of South Carolina’s IRB processes, requiring obtained parental consent. Additionally, there was a possible conflict of power dynamics between me, the researcher, and the students in interviews. Some of the students could have been my own students, past, present, or future. There was also the power dynamic between the interviewed students and their teacher to consider. As these were all unnecessary hurdles to overcome and had

the potential to be problematic for students, after ethical considerations, it seemed more appropriate to interview administrators.

Administrators provided insight into changes in teacher whiteness by providing context of professional conversations and changes in teacher reported student disciplinary infractions. The administrators participating in the interviews were those involved with teacher performance evaluations, observations, and student discipline. These administrators had the most interaction with the teachers and their students and could supply the best third-party perspective of any possible changes in teacher whiteness.

Interviews were semi-structured with six open-ended questions that had been peer reviewed prior to conducting the interviews (see Appendix B). Sensoy and DiAngelo's discussion questions were modified for interview use. These questions had already been vetted for internal reliability and validity in addition to linguistic modifications, so they remained racially neutral, protecting against several forms of interview response bias.

### **Data Analysis**

The action research case study collected both quantitative and qualitative data measures. Due to the nature of data collection methodologies and instruments, Table 3.1 was constructed to guide readers through each of the research questions linked to the relevant data collection method and related tenant of CRT and/or whiteness studies addressed.

**Table 3.1**  
*Case Study Methodology*

	<b>Research Question #1: What changes, if any, are made to teacher whiteness when examined?</b>	<b>Research Question #2: What are teacher responses to examining their whiteness?</b>	<b>Research Question #3: What are the classroom/school implications, if any, of examined whiteness?</b>
<i>Data Collection Methodology</i>	CoBRAS t-test Focus Group	CoBRAS t t-test Interviews	Focus Group Interviews
<i>Relevant CRT Tenet</i>	Permanence of Racism Critique of Liberalism	Permanence of Racism Whiteness	Critique of Liberalism Whiteness

As previously stated, this case study action research study was a convergent mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data collection measures to answer three research questions. The research study was grounded in critical race theory, with whiteness studies theory as the additional theoretical framework. The critical lens of race theory and whiteness studies were used for interpreting the qualitative aspects of the study by specifically examining the power relations of teacher whiteness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). “Power dynamics are at the heart of critical research...race in critical race studies. Questions are asked about who has power, how it’s negotiated, what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power, and so on” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Critical research, and by extension critical race theory, focuses on invisible racial dynamics so that people can challenge power distribution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative measures provided a more robust understanding of the research topic and improved the reliability and validity of findings.

While the strength of the reliability and validity were not necessary for the case study, improving and accounting for reliability and validity brought deeper meaning to the research findings. To improve the validity of the study's qualitative findings, triangulation, or a "combination of multiple data sources[,] enhances the credibility of research findings, and results in developing more feasible and more reliable action plans" (Ivankova, 2015p. 46). Triangulation is used in mixed-method studies in the effort to improve convergence validity within the data by comparing qualitative data with quantitative results and is evidence through unbiased results and not a byproduct of the method used (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Creamer, 2018). Multiple data collection methodologies were used to address each research question in an effort to triangulate data findings and improve the validity of the action research study.

Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1 are sequential diagrams of the constant comparative analysis that was applied to the data collection process. The first set of data to be analyzed was collected through the teacher whiteness survey, CoBRAS. Coding and data analysis were conducted as the instrument creators recommended, promoting a deeper understanding of the study participants, their perceptions of their whiteness, and the implications it had on Students of Color.

These quantitative analyses of pre- and posttest data were used to determine if any statistically significant change to teacher whiteness had occurred through the intervention. The treatment group whiteness scores were compared against the control group whiteness scores. An a priori analysis was used to determine the needed sample sizes for both control and treatment group for a 95% level of significance with a medium effect size.



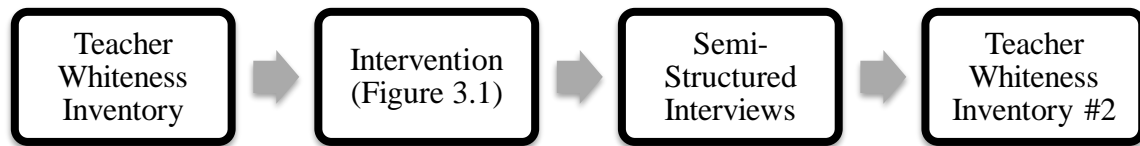
Reducing researcher bias and quantifying knowledge growth, two strengths of this study, were measured using an independent means t-test for the pre- and posttest surveys of the control and treatment groups. Independent means t-test was appropriate for the case study due to projected sample size and the pre- and posttest format of the quantitative data component. Assumptions for the independent means t-test were met and the magnitude of change in teacher whiteness was measured as a way to quantify the change, if any, in teacher whiteness.

The critical qualitative focus groups raised “questions about how power relations advance the interests of one group while oppressing those of other groups” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Data analysis for the qualitative components of the research employed a constant comparative method, and data was analyzed inductively and comparatively throughout the qualitative research to generate findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focus groups were audio recorded using Zoom’s recording feature and transcribed using appropriate computer qualitative data analysis software. These transcriptions were read and thematically grouped based on distinct research questions. Within each research question reoccurring themes were extrapolated and coded, assigning shorthand designations to thematic aspects of the data so specific pieces of data were easily accessible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Major thematic coding was along CRT framework tenets, permanence of racism and critique of liberalism or whiteness, with further detail upon reoccurring ideas.

Interview coding was completed in a similar manner as the focus groups. Emergent categories from focus group analysis were compared to coding from the interviews to see if comparable coding appeared across both qualitative approaches.

## Procedures and Research Plan

Figure 3.2 is a sequential diagram delineating data collection. Quantitative data was initially collected to measure teacher whiteness using the CoBRAS. This data was analyzed and used to understand participant baseline whiteness. In addition, individual Likert items that participants respond to having strong whiteness were used to inform focus group and interview questions. After the intervention phase (Figure 3.1) of the data collection, teacher whiteness was quantifiably re-measured for statistically significant change to see if the intervention, book study, had any effect on treatment group teacher whiteness.



**Figure 3.2**  
*Data Collection Plan*

The CoBRAS was administered using paper copies. Prior to conducting this study, CoBRAS had not been evaluated for internal reliability and validity when the survey format was changed to email, Google Forms, or any other electronic sources. As all individuals participating in the study were at one case study location, collecting paper copies was not a significant hurdle needed to overcome and maintained the integrity of the originally findings of the survey. Completed paper copies of CoBRAS were scored and kept in a locked filing cabinet not at the case study location, improving the confidentiality of participant responses to the whiteness inventory.

The school district required signed consent forms to be given and completed by all 16 research participants. Only after obtaining signed consent forms were participants given the CoBRAS survey. Consent forms were detailed, particularly around diffusion of treatment, where “participants in the control and experimental groups communicate with each other. This communication can influence how both groups score on the outcomes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 170). It was made explicit in the invitation and distribution of consent forms that participants were not to talk with each other about the research, race, or whiteness for the duration of the study. It was especially imperative for control group members to not discuss with treatment group members for the integrity of the research. Treatment group participants were asked to only discuss opinions, questions, and insight during discussion meetings so that all discussion could be recorded, coded, and contribute to the body of research for future analysis. To further ensure participants did not talk with each other, each group was notified of all participants and what group they were in. This helped to protect the integrity of the research so that participants were well informed of the specific school-level individuals with whom they could and could not discuss the research and intervention. As an example, two participants were remarkably close friends working in two different departments, but one participant was in the control group and the other participant was in the treatment group. Their knowledge about which group they were in made it so they did not have to communicate to each other their level of involvement. There were no questions of inquiry between the two, even about group participation, thus preserving the nature of the research from possible bias when participants interacted with each other outside of discussion group settings.

Participants were randomly assigned to the control group and the treatment group using an online random number generator. The control group had no intervention, only the administration of the CoBRAS at the beginning and end of the study. This group represented the typical white female teacher's internalized whiteness and served as the baseline of whiteness and should have had no measurable change in their whiteness (Neville et al., 2000). In Neville et al.'s (2000) initial administration of the CoBRAS survey, there were two weeks between pre- and post-testing participants. This intervention will have a four-week intermission between survey administration (see Figure 3.1).

Even though the control group did not participate in the intervention, these participants did receive Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, the intervention material, after completing their CoBRAS retest after four weeks. Neville et al. (2000) found the survey to have a two-week test-retest reliability. While the CoBRAS survey has not been evaluated for a four–five-week test-retest reliability, the CoBRAS instrument was more reliable than other instruments currently available (Schooley et al., 2019).

The treatment group participants read portions of Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) *Is Everyone Really Equal?* in a book study intervention. The treatment group received the pretest CoBRAS survey to measure baseline internalized whiteness. Through the four-week intervention, treatment participants had to read portions of the assigned intervention (see Figure 3.1). During the one-month book study, the focus group convened to discuss their reactions and perspectives to their reading.

While there was value in reading the entire book, as it was “an introduction to key concepts in social justice education” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) as denoted in the full title, the objective of this research was educator racism through whiteness; therefore, participants were assigned to reading the portions of the book that focused on racialized forms of societal oppression.

Focus/discussion groups were held every week, with participants falling into an every two-week cycle. These discussion groups were guided using prewritten discussion questions with the ultimate flow of the discussion being decided by the flow of conversation of the participants.

These group discussions were initially scheduled via Zoom to protect participants from possible COVID-19 exposure and to ease any participant distress over possible exposure. Scheduling via Zoom allowed for participants flexibility to be in an environment they found comfortable to discuss difficult and often uncomfortable topics. However, while the meetings were scheduled via Zoom, several participants asked to attend face-to-face, citing they found discussion groups more beneficial when everyone was together. Upon this request by two participants, I then made an open invitation for any other participant to attend face-to-face instead of virtually if they found it more comfortable. As a result, all participants attended their focus group discussions face-to-face with the Zoom linked invitations serving as a Google Calendar reminder instead of being used as the meeting platform.

Treatment participants were required to participate in discussion groups, providing insight and reflection from the assigned reading material. All participants were

expected to supply meaningful contribution to the discussion, which could be supported or in counter to specific text from the reading. These cited references provided the researcher an understanding of who has completed the assigned reading and possible individuals who had not. Those not completing the reading could have altered the results from the study by showing little to no change in their retest results. Prior to beginning readings, participants were made aware they would be expected to cite and support discussion from the reading. Informing participants prior to beginning the study protected the reliability of the discussion, supporting discussion with data and not solely relying on individual opinion, a common by product of white fragility.

At the conclusion of the four-week intervention, treatment participants retook the CoBRAS survey. Scores on both the test and retest were scaled and scored for each participant per the instrument creator's specifications. Deville et al. (2000) performed multiple mathematical analyses to determine the validity and reliability of their instrument, an independent means t-test analysis was performed for this study to determine if there was any statistically significant change in teacher whiteness.

After the CoBRAS posttest, administrator interviews were conducted. These interviews were semi-structured and were relevant to all study participants, control, and treatment. Administrator interviews provided a third data source, which was necessary for triangulation and improved internal reliability of the case study.

After data analysis and formalized write-up, the study participants were allowed to review the findings. Data about study participants was kept confidential, no names or identifiers about school location were provided in the final report. The population of

white female teachers at the case study location was sufficiently large, allowing for anonymity between the treatment and control groups. While the experiment could not be completed blindly, the samples were large enough for individual descriptors within the final report to remain unidentifiable. After completing data analysis and formalizing results, the research findings were made available for individuals at the district office to review if they would like. In addition, study participants were sent copies of the research findings for their own review.

### **Ethical Considerations**

A thoroughly explained and signed consent form was needed from every participant. It was important to reframe whiteness away from a societal negative ideology to a mindset of understanding; a signed consent form eased some ethical conundrums for participants. After reviewing a well-written and thorough consent form participation in the study was voluntary, participants could decide not to participate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The consent form was pre-approved by the University of South Carolina IRB program and the District Office Director of Assessment and Accountability. The school district IRB process also required a district level release of liability form due to South Carolina state education budget proviso 1.105. The release of liability form was also preapproved by district personnel and my dissertation chair.

In addition, participants were reminded at the beginning of each discussion group that participation was optional. If, for any reason, they no longer wanted to participate or felt uncomfortable they were free to leave and withdraw from the study. Participants were also reminded that while they could leave, it was encouraged that they remain for the duration of the discussion groups and listen, even if they no longer felt comfortable

contributing to the discussion. Prior to beginning each session, I also appealed to the empathetic nature of these teachers reminding them that working and addressing whiteness and race in the schools is a difficult subject, one that very few white people are comfortable discussing. However, if we, as a collaborative research team partook in the learning experience together, pushed past the discomfort and truly engaged, we had the potential to learn and possibly change education experiences for students.

I utilized a whiteness inventory created by other experts in the field. There were myriad reasons why this instrument was selected, but not plagiarizing was an ethical concern for the research. To use the CoBRAS instrument, I obtained written consent from the survey's lead author, Dr. Neville. Without the author's consent, the pre- and posttest instrument could not be used, as it would have been plagiarizing—copying extensive material from others without giving credit or consideration to the creators (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Dr. Neville gave her written consent and requested a copy of research findings be sent to her at the completion of the study and the dissertation defense.

### **Summary**

This case study convergent mixed-methods action research centered on my desire to better understand my peers and the workings of whiteness within my education setting. The focus groups and administrator interviews were conducted and analyzed using a convergent mixed methods case study design. A mixed-methods study had both open-ended, qualitative data and closed-ended, quantitative data to address the research questions (see Table 3.1). Deliberate measures were taken to preserve the reliability and validity of study findings by using a vetted test instrument, CoBRAS, and previously created focus group and interview questions that were intentionally written as discussion



questions for the chosen intervention. The study was conducted in three phases over a six-week period (Figure 3.2).

The phases of this study included two quantitative phases and two qualitative phases. The quantitative phases were included to provide pre- and posttest data to determine if there was a statistically significant change in teacher whiteness and if there was a change, what aspects of whiteness were altered. The qualitative phases, the focus group discussions, and administrator interviews provided a depth and richness to the understanding of whiteness and its functioning within the school setting. The amount of information gained and thematically coded from the focus groups and interviews could not have been achieved through the survey instrument alone.

My problem of practice stemmed from my desire to better understand the working of my whiteness and the whiteness of my peers. Through focus group discussions and administrator interviews, I tried to systematically analyze and understand whiteness and white supremacy at the case study location. Driven by social justice and a desire to challenge the existing racial understanding and whitewashing of classrooms, I employed an action research design to explore the whiteness of teachers and the case study location so we were more informed of our actions and behaviors that could then alter our culturally relevant practice. Through the CoBRAS survey, audio-recorded focus group discussions, and recorded administrator interviews, I tried to capture instances of teacher whiteness and discussion that had the potential to alter teacher perceptions and student educational outcomes.

Data collection for this study began in January of 2022, after IRB approval was granted from the University of South Carolina and the IRB process was completed for the school district of the case study. Participants began in January after winter break so that the data collection and discussion could be gathered in one, uninterrupted six-week time period. The full data collection process, including both qualitative and quantitative measures, were completed by mid-March 2022.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The objectives of this action research investigation were to examine teacher whiteness and to see if it could be changed. Based on an extensive literature review in Chapter 2, an innovative approach for investigating whiteness was used. This mixed methods approach was justified because there was little evidence found in the existing literature that described practicing teacher awareness of whiteness and little evidence of a mixed method or quantitative approach to examining whiteness. This research was needed as the current teacher workforce is predominantly white and are often unaware of their racial bias and inherent white privilege. As student demographics at the case study location are constantly changing and becoming more heterogeneous, there was a need for teacher awareness of whiteness and racial privilege. The research questions guiding this investigation were:

1. What are teacher responses toward examining their whiteness?
2. What are the classroom implications, if any, of examined whiteness and how does this impact teaching those who are culturally different?
3. What changes, if any, are made to teacher whiteness when examined?

To answer these research questions, a convergent mixed methods approach was used, as discussed in Chapter 3. Two types of data were collected in four sequential phases. Phase 1 included a quantitative measure, CoBRAS survey, to measure teacher baseline

whiteness (Appendix C). Phase 2 included qualitative focus groups to gather open-ended data about the assigned reading. These focus discussion groups followed prescribed focus group questions (Appendix A) that then lead into additional discussions, as was dictated by study participants. The assigned reading and focus group questions were intended to gain a deeper understanding of quantitative findings. Phase 3 included another administration of the CoBRAS survey to measure any change in teacher whiteness for those randomly selected for the treatment group. Final data measures were collected in Phase 4, administrator interviews. These interviews followed prescribed interview questions (Appendix B). Administrator interviews were used to gain an outsider perspective on study participants and the case study location. Additionally, administrator interviews were used to triangulate findings in Phases 1–3, making the findings more robust and less subjective to the limitations of qualitative research.

A total of 16 white female classroom teachers with three or more years of experience agreed to participate in the study. The majority of academic departments within the school were represented: English (25%,  $n = 4$ ), math (25%,  $n = 4$ ), special education (19%,  $n = 3$ ), history (13%,  $n = 2$ ), science, (6%,  $n = 1$ ), foreign language (6%,  $n = 1$ ), and the arts (6%,  $n = 1$ ). The physical education department included only one female teacher with less than three years of experience; therefore, she was excluded from the list of possible study participants. All participants identified as white, with one participant wanting to be identified as white Greek, placing emphasis on her nationality.

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of all four phases of data collection. A presentation of the data and discussion of the findings is described in detail. Triangulation of the data collection and the interpretive meaning of addressing the

research questions is discussed. Notes, quotes, and observations are also included as needed.

### **Results of the Quantitative Pre- and Posttest**

As outlined in Chapter 3, all participants were asked to complete the CoBRAS survey prior to taking part in the assigned reading and discussion groups (Appendix C) . Individuals completed the CoBRAS survey before being told their random assignment to the control or treatment groups. Neville et al. (2000) constructed CoBRAS, where higher scores correlated to higher levels of whiteness, colorblindness, denial, or unawareness of racialized privilege. The survey addressed three factors of whiteness: unawareness of racial privilege, unawareness of institutional discrimination, and unawareness to blatant racial issues (Neville et al., 2000).

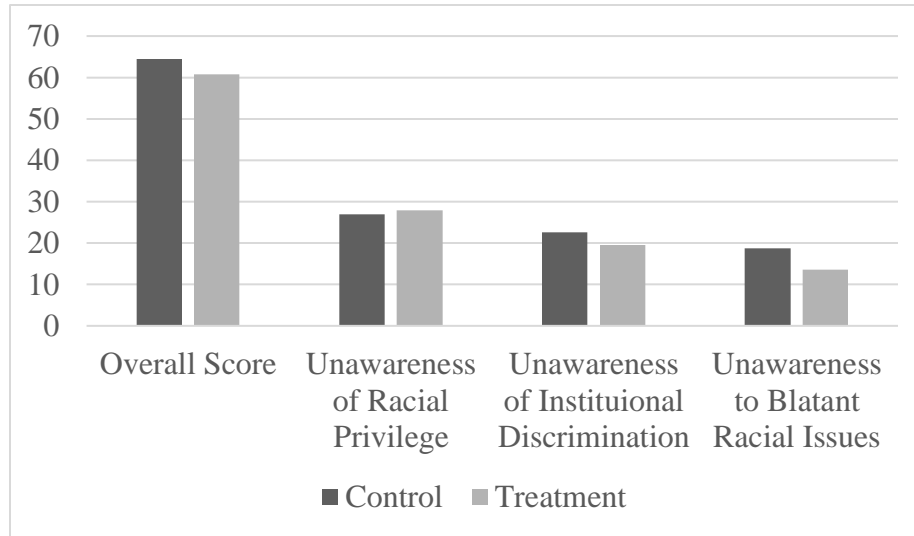
#### **Pretest Results**

One hundred percent ( $n = 16$ ) of the participants completed the first administration of the CoBRAS survey. In addition, 94% ( $n = 15$ ) of participants completed the second administration of the CoBRAS survey. However, because two participants randomly selected for the treatment group did not attend either discussion group, I reduced the data pool for the quantitative data to those participants who completed both CoBRAS survey and participated in the discussion groups. This data reduction was justified because qualitative findings for all treatment group participants could now be analyzed. This reduction also insured that all treatment participants did complete the assigned intervention and were able to meaningfully discuss topics in the assigned reading, thus improving the validity of treatment group findings.

The mean score for the control group pretest was a 64.43 (SD = 8.85), suggesting an elevated level of racial blindness. Unawareness of racial privilege had a mean of 26.86 (SD = 3.58), unawareness of institutional discrimination's mean was 22.57 (SD = 4.08), and unawareness of blatant racial issues had a mean of 18.79 (SD = 3.70). The results from the pretest of the control group showed a high level of racial blindness with unawareness of racial privilege being the highest subcategory of whiteness.

The treatment group had comparable results on their pretest data. The mean score of the pretest for the treatment group was 60.83 (SD = 15.59), which suggested a high level of racial blindness, but with more within-group variability than the control group. Unawareness of racial privilege had a mean of 27.833 (SD = 6.24), unawareness of institutional discrimination's mean was 19.5 (SD = 7.53), and unawareness of blatant racial issues had a mean of 13.5 (SD = 3.62). The results from the pretest of the treatment group shows a high level of racial blindness, with unawareness of racial privilege being the highest subcategory of whiteness.

Further examination of individual participant pretest data showed two participants in the treatment group scored significantly higher than their group members, 75 and 73 respectively, explaining the standard deviation of the treatment group being significantly larger than the standard deviation of the control group. Figure 4.1, Participant Pretest Scores on CoBRAS, is a comparative display of the means of the control and treatment groups pre-study data results.



**Figure 4.1**  
*Participant Pretest Scores on CoBRAS*

Unawareness of racial privilege focuses on the blindness to white privilege. An ignorance to racialized white privilege often assumes that “all peoples are like me” and applies one’s own perspective and life experiences to other groups (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This type of life outlook minimizes the cultural differences of people’s lived experiences and disregards diversity issues because the inherent skin privilege appears invisible (Sleeter, 2017).

As educators, all participants were actively involved in a government-run institution, as the case study location was a public high school. Unawareness of institutional discrimination does not acknowledge how racism is routinely reinforced in policy and procedure within the school setting. Having blindness to institutional discrimination allows for the functions of oppression and racism to continue to flourish in policy and procedure within the school (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). Blindness to blatant racial issues minimized the effects of racial aggressions within the school and community setting. These racial issues, displayed as racial macro- or

microaggressions, go unnoticed or are minimized by white teachers (Solorzano & Perez Huber, 2020). The racialized lens with which white teachers view student/teacher interactions, disciplinary infractions, and the case study location affect classroom climates and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Regardless of group assignment, control or treatment, racial privilege and institutional discrimination were the two highest areas of racial denial. Based on pretest findings, no modifications were made to the discussion group questions as the questions addressed all three areas of whiteness. Further probing questions were asked of the treatment focus group individuals to delve deeper into these three areas of whiteness and foster a deeper more meaningful conversation.

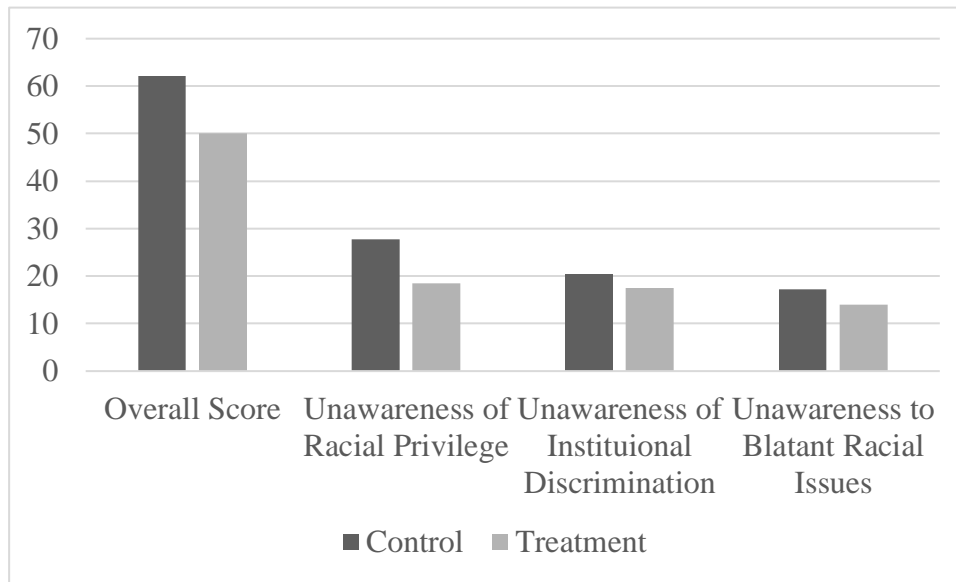
### **Posttest Results**

Following the last discussion group, all participants were asked to complete the same CoBRAS survey to measure racial blindness. The posttest for the control group remained at a high level of racial blindness with a mean score of 62.14 (SD = 11.42). Of the three subcategories, unawareness of racial privilege had a mean of 27.71 (SD = 5.38), unawareness of institutional discrimination's mean was 20.43 (SD = 4.54), and unawareness of blatant racial issues had a mean of 17.21 (SD = 3.79). The results from the posttest of the control group showed no statistically significant change in elevated levels of whiteness. While there was marginal fluctuation in overall averages and standard deviations of the control group, these slight differences were normal and acceptable variation, as found by Neville et al. (2000) in their examination of the validity and reliability of the test instrument. The results from the posttest of the control group showed a sustained high level of whiteness, with unawareness of racial privilege being



the highest subcategory of denial. This was expected, as there was no treatment applied to these individuals and there were no significant outside sources, school-level professional development, national news, etc. that should have altered their responses.

The treatment group had significant changes in their posttest data. The mean score of the posttest for the treatment group was 50 (SD = 16.25), a drop of nearly 11 points, indicating a possible statistically significant change in whiteness, but still remained higher for in group variability than the control group. Of the three subcategories, unawareness of racial privilege showed the most change with a mean of 18.5 (SD = 6.06), unawareness of institution discrimination had a mean of 17.5 (SD = 7.40), and unawareness of blatant racial issues having a mean of 14 (SD = 3.65). Additional examination of individual survey responses showed two treatment group participants remained with high whiteness scores, 66 and 65 respectively, explaining the large standard deviation of the treatment group. Even with these two high whiteness scores, these individuals were 11 and 8 points lower, respectively, than their original pretest survey results. Figure 4.2, Participant Posttest Scores on CoBRAS, shows the posttest data for the control versus treatment groups.

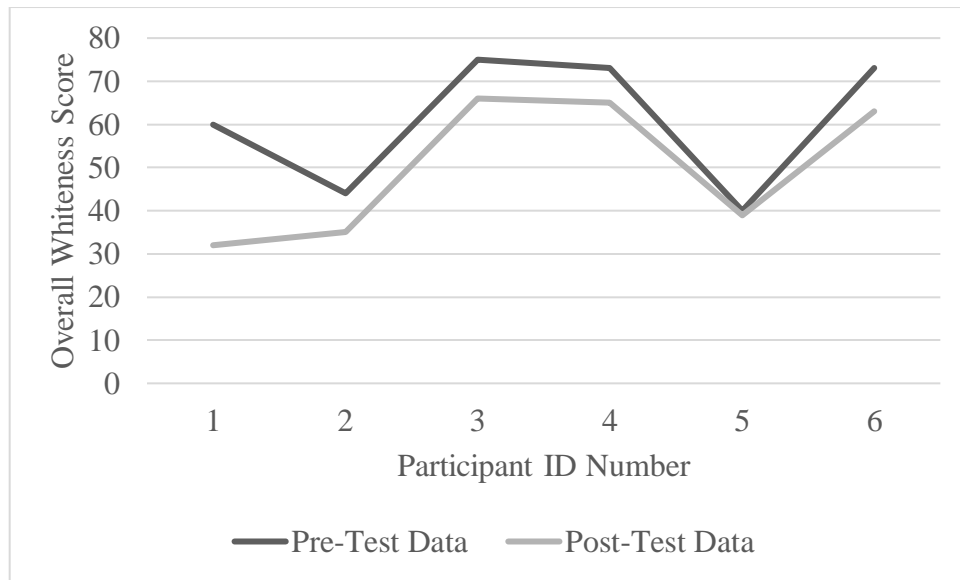


**Figure 4.2**  
*Participant Posttest Scores on CoBRAS*

**Exploratory Paired t-Test Results**

An exploratory paired t-test was conducted, using the software Excel, to compare the overall CoBRAS survey results of treatment pretest and posttest scores. Additionally, all three subcategories of whiteness were also subjected to t-test analysis to determine statistically significant change, if any. The overall mean scores of the pretest and posttest CoBRAS were used in the analysis. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant change in overall whiteness between the pretest and posttests for the treatment group,  $p = 0.03$  (two-tailed assuming equal variances). Therefore, the null hypothesis, no statistically significant change in whiteness by participating in the book study and discussion groups, was rejected. Participants of the treatment group did experience statistically significant changes in their whiteness and blindness to racial inequality. Further analysis of individual unawarenesses showed a statistically significant change in racial privilege,  $p = 0.01$ , but no statistically significant change in institutional racism ( $p$

= 0.11) and no statistically significant change in blatant racial issues ( $p = 0.66$ ). Figure 4.3 displays the change in treatment participants between the pretest and posttest scoring. Table 4.1 shows the individual score different for the pretest and posttest data for the treatment group.



**Figure 4.3**  
*Display of CoBRAS Whiteness Scores Pre- and Posttest for the Treatment Group*

**Table 4.1***Individual Score Differences on the CoBRAS Pretest and Posttest*

Subject Number	Pre-test score	Posttest score	Differences in Scores
1	60	32	-28
2	44	35	-9
3	75	66	-9
4	73	65	-8
5	40	39	-1
6	73	63	-10

### Summary of Quantitative Results

Results of the pretest and posttest CoBRAS indicated statistically significant improvement in racial blindness or whiteness. Data was analyzed using paired t-tests, which confirmed an overall statistically significant change in the treatment group and a statistically significant change in unawareness of racial privilege. The change in racial blindness could be explained by the assigned reading as well as the discussion group conversations. As a point of interest: Participants who began with lower scores were younger participants with fewer years of experience. In addition, these younger teachers referenced undergraduate multicultural education courses, specifically sections that focused on the racialization of students and teachers.

The assigned reading for the discussion groups focused on topics that included defining critical race theory and racism, individual racism, structural and systematic racism, power, privilege, oppression, and white supremacy. The topics were presented through the reading and then discussed in small, informal focus groups. Participants were asked to engage in the discussion by examining their own power, privilege, and

oppressive ways. New discoveries about racism within oneself and systematic racism were still evident in the United States, specifically the case study's location. These were discussed and more visible when participants completed the posttest CoBRAS.

Participation in the discussion groups was also categorized as being difficult and uncomfortable, making participants grapple with the issues so often avoided by white people. The discussion groups forced treatment participants to engage in race work. They had to delve deep into the uncomfortable acknowledgement of skin privilege and the implications of colorblindness ideology (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The qualitative data resulted in a deeper dive into the murky waters of participants' experiences. The following section describes the results of the qualitative protocols.

### **Summary of Qualitative Results**

Qualitative data was collected in Phases 2 and 4 during this study. The first set of qualitative data was during Phase 2, treatment group focus groups. Each treatment group member had to attend two focus group sessions to reflect and discuss the assigned reading. The guiding questions for the discussion groups were written by Sensoy and DiAngelo in *Is Everyone Really Equal?*. Focus group questions required participants to be self-reflective of their behaviors, community openness to racially different individuals, community progress towards acceptance, and any additional personal and community experiences that could influence their views. Both sets of discussion questions were administered orally, face-to-face, in a controlled classroom environment after school hours.

Qualitative data analysis techniques were used to identify emergent themes in the data. Following the completion of Phase 2, I reviewed the audio transcripts of the

discussion groups and listened for repetitions of themes and ideas, similarities and differences among participants, and any noteworthy comments or remarks. I then analyzed the recurrent ideas and themes for possible relationships. I compared these reoccurring ideas within participants and across participants for variability. Comparing individual responses to my own personal experience and knowledge helped to bring the findings to light. Using an Excel table, I organized the categories and themes. Upon review, I was able to compare and categorize the relationships.

Noting what was missing from participant responses was easiest and most illuminating. When discussing hard topics, such as racism, participants would blatantly avoid the discussion and redirect, answering a question not asked in order to alleviate the discomfort of the topic at hand. For example, when discussing race, many participants did not want to use the words “Black” or “African American” to describe Black people and often stumbled over the racial and ethnic identifiers. Additionally, participants would say “white” in a normal voice and tone when talking about themselves, but as a cultural response to discussing Black individuals, the word “Black” or “African American” was almost whispered and almost inaudible at times on the Zoom recordings. When asked why, as this was asked in two different discussion groups, they were unconscious of the change in their tone and body language and, upon reflection, said they changed because they knew they were not supposed to talk about it. This change in body language and tone feed the unconscious racial bias that so often goes unnoticed and undocumented in the racialized system in which we live (DiAngelo, 2018).

Lastly, I looked for connections between the emergent themes and the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and whiteness studies. As described previously in

Chapter 1, critical race theory provided an understanding and consciousness to the institutional racially discriminating practices in the United States education system and the case study location. The goal of the assigned reading, focus groups, and self-reflection was to facilitate awareness for participants of the racialized society in which they live and their contributing roles in maintaining the status quo and white solidarity. While the research questions were hopeful in participant change, if any, the first step to change was awareness: To change is awareness.

### **Discussion Group Results**

The first discussion group did not focus on race and racism; instead, at the urging of my dissertation chair and other experts in the field, it focused on fostering open and respectful discussions. Race work could be hard and uncomfortable (DiAngelo, 2018), and participants needed to often feel at ease prior to beginning the hard work of self-reflection on the participation of upholding a racist and oppressive system. The topics of the first discussion group were about personal reflection on the learning of different people (race, gender, religious, socioeconomics, ability, etc.), how prejudice began, and how we manifested internalize prejudice towards anyone different.

The second installment of focus groups focused more specifically on racism, white supremacy, and the education system. Participants were asked to reflect on their racialized past, the racialization of the community, and the racism in the case study location. As a result of this discussion, both focus groups had participants ask what should be done to improve the inequity facing BIPOC people, specifically what was the white person's responsibility. The groups brainstormed reparations within themselves, their classrooms, and the school to change the racialized climate that was present.

All present treatment group members participated in the discussions and responded to the moderator's questions. The data was coded and categorized into relational themes. Three different themes emerged from the focus groups: lived experience, racism, and ignorance and awareness. All three themes were present in all the focus groups, even though the groups had different participants.

### **Lived Experience Witnessing Racism**

All participants were asked to reflect on their lived experience of learning about different people and what message they received from this experience. Childhood awareness of people who were different (non-white, able bodied, and able minded) resulted in confusion, embarrassment, and shame. Two participants reflected on personal experiences in which they were verbally and/or physically assaulted by an adult for having meaningful relationships with Black peers. Participant 5 commented:

When I was in kindergarten, I had a lot of experience witnessing how people who are different from me were treated versus how I was treated. My first memory was from kindergarten and my boyfriend was a young black boy and my dad and one of his friends came to pick me up and my dad's friend was like, "what is she doing with that N-word?," in front of a whole class of people. And like I didn't know what that meant, but he was upset and I was like that's weird, but then as I got older I noticed that that because I'm a girl and I'm white I always got treated pretty well, and I noticed that people who weren't as smart, or didn't look like me, or were different than me in some way were held to different standards.

Another participant commented on a meaningful experience of going to a Black basketball teammate's house. Participant 4 stated:



Growing up I didn't see us as different. I looked up to my Black teammates because they were older and so much better at the game. One day after practice, now—this is in high school, mind you—I went over to a Black teammates house. We had something to eat and then worked on our free throws in her driveway. When I got home that night and my mom caught wind of what I'd done, she told me I was never allowed to go to her house again and then she tore me up.

These experiences shaped participant perceptions of race and racism that they still carry today. When recanting these stories, several other participants nodded in understanding, and one said she was shushed by her mother when she asked about a Black man's skin as a child. All these participants said that they learned early on, at the hands of white adults, that there are two distinct groups of people: white and other. Participant 1 even went so far as to say, "while my mother didn't explicitly tell me not to have Black friends, I was taught there is us and then there is them. We keep to us and they keep to them."

While some participants discussed having less traumatic experiences, no participant had led a racially diverse life. All participants discussed attending all-white churches, living in all-white neighborhoods, and being in honors academic classes that were majority white. Participants did not consider the Black and Brown peers they interacted with as being Black or Brown. In fact, Participant 2 stated, "they were more white than they were Black. She [a Black honors student peer] didn't want anything to do with the other Black kids."

When asked how this affected their teaching, many did not have an answer. While participants acknowledged that they have led segregated lives, they were unable to

verbalize how the segregation affected their teaching. More specifically, the white female teacher was unable to identify how their segregated lives and lived experiences impacted their teaching of Black and Brown students.

## **Racism**

Racism within the case study location and community at large were routinely and repeatedly mentioned during the discussion groups. Different participants in different discussion groups discussed the racist past of the community. The location of the case study had a very distinguished past with connections to the Klu Klux Klan. Participant 6, who was raised in a neighboring community, said, “Black people were afraid of [case study location] because of the KKK.”

Participant 4 recounted teaching the KKK Grand Dragon’s grandchild when she first started teaching at the case study location in the late 1990s. This same participant talked about the KKK notice board as she drove into community limits that had the date, time, and location of the next rally. She said, “It was posted like it was no big deal. Everyone knew and no one cared. I can’t imagine what it felt like to be Black living here.” While both participants recounted these experiences from the 1980s and 1990s, the most recent recollections from the 2000s were equally as infuriating to other participants.

District policy allowed employee children to ride a shuttle bus to the high school at the end of their school day. These children were then allowed to sit in the classrooms of their parent as the parent finished teaching. However, a treatment participant recounted how a former Black coworker having her children shuttled from the elementary school to the high school was required to partition her children in the classroom so her students did not have to see her children. This partition treatment was singular to this one teacher, the

only Black teacher at the school. No one knew exactly why this teacher had to have a partition, but Participant 4 said, “I dunno why her kids were hidden. It was almost like her students didn’t want to see little Black children. It goes without saying, that particular teacher left after that year.”

These recounts of blatant racism within the school and community shocked other focus group participants, particularly younger teachers with 10 or fewer years of experience. As follow-up questions to these recollections of school and community racism, I asked what people did, particularly white people, about it. On all occasions, participants stated that nothing was done. The veteran teachers with 15 or more years of experience talked about fear. Their lack of response was fear based. Participant 4 said:

What are you going to do? What was I to do? The Grand Dragon’s grandchild was in my room. If he didn’t like what I did, even though I’m white, I’m a woman. He could have done things to me too and no one would have said anything.

As DiAngelo (2018) said, these women acted out of white solidarity, a fear of breaking from the white pack at the fear of the social and emotional repercussions.

### **Ignorance and Awareness**

As the women in the discussion groups became aware of the rampant racism within the community and school, they began to develop common reactions to having their whiteness examined. Several developed defense mechanisms, placing the racist actions on others, particularly administrators, and did not take any responsibility themselves. Some began to question their own understanding and behaviors, with

Participant 3 acknowledging, “I learned about Blacks from tv and didn’t know about Hispanics until I saw them in the fields. But what did I really know? What do I really know? About their lives? About who they are?”

Three participants, Participants 1, 2, and 4, discussed changes they were making in their classrooms after having completed the readings and discussion groups.

Participant 2 said she was changing who gets to ask and answer questions. “I noticed it was the white males that took up so much airtime in the classroom. I want to make sure everyone talks. The white guy doesn’t get to dominate the conversation anymore.” An English teacher participant, Participant 5, said she is changing material for next year to have more diverse authors, indicating, “I want good Black authors telling their story.”

Participant 1, a special education teacher, said she used some of what she had learned to help resolve conflict with students. In her classroom, there was a verbal confrontation between a Black and white student. She stated:

In that moment, I let the Black boy explain himself first. The white boy kept trying to interject and wouldn’t let the Black student talk. I guess he’s so used to being able to dominate and be heard first and loudest. I think by silencing him and letting the Black student be heard first mattered. I didn’t say it, but I wanted to tell the white kid, “be quiet and sit your privileged white butt down.”

As the teachers became aware of their racism and what it meant to be in a white supremacist society, they became more comfortable using the terms “white,” “Black,” and “Brown” to describe people. They began to brainstorm small ways to counter racial microaggressions in the school and their classrooms. While no teacher was radical in

their propositions, not breaking from white solidarity, they became aware of many of the racial microaggressions regularly inflicted on the BIPOC students. These teachers became aware of some of their racial bias, complacency with racial macro- and microaggressions. These teachers began to implement small changes in their vernacular and environment to be more racially conscious and culturally relevant.

All participants agreed, while the KKK sign has been taken down and the community was not as blatantly racist as it used to be, the racial terror inflicted on members of the community still lingered. The shadows of the past still presently darken the halls of the case study location.

### **Administrator Interviews**

At the case study location, there were four administrators. There was one principal, two assistant principals, and one head of guidance, who was considered an administrator. For the purposes of this research, only the principal and assistant principals were interviewed because they routinely interacted with teachers and students. These three white men interacted regularly with teachers, conducted classroom observations, and handled student discipline referrals and parental complaints. All three men were interviewed separately. Prescribed interview questions were used (see Appendix B), with subsequent questions asked to probe for further detail.

All three administrators noticed a difference in racial breakdown of the student, teacher, and support staff. While there was slight variation among administrator percentages, approximately 80% of the student population was white and 20% of the student population were Students of Color. All three administrators agreed the teacher

population was 90–95% white, with the support staff, particularly the custodial staff, having the opposite demographic, with approximately 90–95% BIPOC, particularly Black. All three agreed the case study location was not racially diverse.

Two of the three administrators did not feel the case study location was in need of antiracist and whiteness education. One administrator even said, “there’s a lot of people who aren’t lucky because they’re white. We have a lot of white people in the same situation as Black people.” These two administrators said that while some individuals, particularly a few white males, might benefit from antiracist education, it was not needed at the school as a collective. One administrator had a very different perspective, saying, “this school is hateful and targets kids. Anybody different than white male or white female.” He continued by saying:

This school is so stuck in the ‘90s and ‘80s it’s not even funny ... it’s indoctrination and it’s just something that’s in this area and in this school and if you’re not strong enough to fight against it, I could see how it would suck you in because it’s so easy to talk shit about people.

When asked if they noticed a change in study participants, there were very limited responses. Two administrators commented on two control group members being more withdrawn and disengaged with students, noting an uptick in parental and student complaints and student discipline referrals. One of the participants of the treatment group was considered “very racially and socioeconomically aware of what’s going on with kids and trying to meet their needs.” Another treatment group participant told the principal and an assistant principal that she believed she had become a better teacher than she used

to be; she is now focused on teaching the whole child. The principal said another treatment participant had become “more open to new ideas this semester than in the past.”

While there were positive comments and marginal notes made about control and treatment group participants, no administrator noticed any significant changes in classroom management, disciplinary referrals, or parental and student complaints. As a point of interest, it was also relevant to note that no administrator conducted a classroom observation of control or treatment group participants during the duration of this investigation. No administrator was able to discuss first-hand knowledge of the classroom conduct and student interactions of the teachers in the study within this time period.

### **Triangulation**

The convergent mixed methods model design for this study was used to triangulate the data for validity purposes. The quantitative and qualitative components of the data were used to understand whiteness and facilitate discussion about what it meant to be a white teacher and the implications in the classroom. The change in the variance in treatment group participants was significant ( $n = 6$ ), becoming more racially aware of racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues. The qualitative data, focus group discussions and administrator interviews, supported an explanation for the variance in treatment group participants. While several 67 % ( $n = 4$ ) of treatment group participants employed defense mechanisms as outlined by DiAngelo (2018), other participants became critical of their behavior and questioned their responses. The group became aware of their racialization and were outraged at the current white supremacist system that continued to marginalize BIPOC peoples at the case study location and

surrounding community. Throughout discussions participants moved along a continuum of maintaining white solidarity and breaking from white solidarity to question their own actions and those of other group members.

While data collection was limited, reoccurring themes did arise and provided a deeper description and understanding to the changes in quantitative results from the pre- and posttest CoBRAS surveys. The lived experiences theme provided a framework to better understand the background of individual teachers and the context from which they were raised and its influence in their classroom. Discussing lived experiences shed light on the racist, segregated past of all treatment group participants. They became aware of how these often-early memories shaped their understanding of those that are different or other.

Treatment group participants all agreed they learned new information about race, racism, white supremacy, and the case study location. This latest information led to a deeper understanding of differences in individuals, what it meant to be racist, and the unearned benefits that accompanied the color of their skin, white. A disruption to whiteness and white privilege required a deeper understanding of context and racial issues that plague society, education, and the case study location. For example, one treatment group participant described conversations with her husband about racism, power, privilege, and work harder mentality following the second focus group discussion, while another participant described discussions with a white co-worker about cultural undercurrents that surfaced after the George Floyd murder.



Most treatment group participants did not have an understanding of the racially charged past of education nor of the continued pattern of inequitable school funding and racialized rezoning patterns of schools. The lack of knowledge of racist patterns within schools hindered their ability to initially discuss classroom implications and teaching BIPOC students. While teachers did brainstorm ways in which to improve the education of marginalized students, current legislation in the state of this study severely limited the ability to openly discuss how to better equip white teachers to equitably teach BIPOC students, how to overcome racial microaggressions within the classroom, and minimize whiteness.

Results from the quantitative measure showed a significant change in awareness of racial privilege. Qualitative data results from focus group discussions provided more robust details about awareness of racial privilege and a reduction in colorblindness ideology. Participants previous understanding of work harder mentality was disrupted as they became aware of differences in life experiences. Several treatment group participants realized they were not a product of their singular efforts but a product of a societal system that made it easier for individuals of white skin to succeed. They acknowledged learning about racism. As Participant 2 said, “It [racism] is bigger than what I perceived” and “we don’t like to talk about race. It makes white people uncomfortable. There’s unconscious power in being white.”

Participants who minimized the effects and privileges of being white deployed defense mechanisms to protect themselves and their whiteness from scrutiny. Often after initial responses of anger, guilt, and rage, all defense mechanisms of white fragility

(DiAngelo, 2018), these individuals were open to discussion and were willing to have their whiteness and perspective challenged by other members of the group.

### **Summary**

The goal of this mixed methods action research study was to facilitate awareness and understand of whiteness within the white female teacher and their ability to teach culturally relevant pedagogy in a high school classroom. A mixed methods approach was used to analyze teacher whiteness and facilitate awareness, an approach that had not yet been used in whiteness research. Three types of data were collected and utilized to answer the research questions. The quantitative measure was administered pre- and post the readings and discussion groups. Control and treatment groups were used to measure significant differences in quantitative results to ensure that any data findings were because of the book study and focus group and not other extraneous reasons (i.e., professional development). The qualitative measures were administered repeatedly throughout the month-long book study in the form of focus group discussions and administrator interviews.

The goals of the discussion groups were to facilitate authentic discussion about race, whiteness, and white supremacy at the case study location. The series of focus groups increased white female teacher cultural competency in racism and provided a better understanding of the workings of whiteness within the case study's location. Although ways to improve teaching to be more inclusive and culturally relevant were discussed, there were no specific measures put in place to monitor the implementation of these modifications.

While administrator interviews were conducted to gain a different perspective of these white female teachers, for the purposes of triangulation, the interviews did not yield any meaningful results in relation to the study participants. Administrator interviews yielded an understanding of the cultural climate of the school and the goals of the district with very little insight to meaningful changes within the study participants.

Study participants acknowledged that their racialized past affects their current segregated lives, but there was no clear understanding on what to do next. All participants agreed that we, white teachers, do not have the luxury of being colorblind, especially in light of recent racialized attacks that have gained national media coverage. All participants agreed they learned about the white supremacist past of education, current racial blindness at the case study location, and the effects of their racialization on their ability to teach culturally relevant pedagogy. All participants agreed they learned as a result from the investigation. As a result, a few participants (19%, n = 3) asked for more reading material, and one specifically asked the principal to buy reading material for department chairs for the 2022–2023 school year. As Participant 2 said, “I now know what my daughter says when she says ‘woke.’ I don’t think I’ll ever be ‘woke’ as a white woman, but I can try, learn, and change now that I better understand my position in the system.”

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

This action research investigation was grounded in social justice and focused on the effects of whiteness and white privilege in education. This study tried to contribute valuable insight into the awareness of white privilege and supremacy in education and practical options for improving cultural competency among educators as a way to support culturally relevant pedagogy. “An emerging body of scholarship grounded in critical race theory has been notable in exposing how racism has been normalized in American society and has been a prominent force in interrogating white privilege and white supremacy in education” (Applebaum, 2012, p. 616).

While the education work force is beginning to racially diversify, the majority of gender and racial diversification is being seen in higher education, leaving K–12 practically stagnant in racialized representations (Hiraldo, 2010). As such it is imperative that most of the K–12 work force, white teachers, understand the prevalence of their whiteness and how it manifests in the classroom. No one is void of race and its implications. By addressing white educator privilege and supremacy, the educational paradigm can begin to shift to address other forms of inequality (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995). “Failing to pay attention to the subtle, often unintentional ways that white people contribute to the perpetuation of systemic racial injustice through white practices protects white innocence” (Applebaum, 2012, pp. 616–617).

This research study was grounded in critical race theory and whiteness studies. This action research was intended to address white educator racial bias, thus examining how race and racism is perpetuated in education. The whiteness of a classroom teacher, or any member of the education community, affects the classroom and school environment and can hinder the ability of students (DiAngelo, 2006; Gillborn, 2019). Colorblindness, a manifestation of white supremacy, stems from a fundamental tenet of critical race theory. “Educators’ constructions of multicultural education as both powerblind sameness and colorblind difference protect whiteness by normalizing majoritarian perspectives and knowledge; obscuring or ignoring race, structural arrangements, and inequity; and failing to pursue social change” (Castagno, 2013, p. 102).

Understanding teacher whiteness as a perpetuation of colorblind ideologies and misguided equal opportunities was addressed for a deeper understanding of white talk, “the discourse that functions to insulate White people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism” (Applebaum, 2012, p. 617), a key feature of the systematic racial oppression working within the case study. This study focused on unconscious racial bias, power, privilege, and oppression within white teachers at a specific case study location. A semi-structured book study using focus groups was developed for the treatment group faculty at the case study location, the smallest, most rural high school in a large suburban school district in which I am an educator.

Informal discussions with treatment participants at the location identified a lack of racial awareness, whiteness, and colorblind ideology leading to an inability to teach

culturally relevant pedagogy. Participants agreed they were not aware of the pervasive white supremacy within themselves or the community. These tenured faculty members cannot be expected to instruct students, particularly BIPOC students, without receiving appropriate training which fosters awareness and self-reflection. A lack of legally supported ability to discuss critical race theory and whiteness in education perpetuates the disparity in educational outcomes for marginalized and minoritized populations.

The problem of practice I addressed in this investigation was the gap in knowledge of teacher whiteness and the implications in classrooms when whiteness is examined. I focused on teacher self-reflection and diagnosis after presenting them with information about key concepts of social justice in education. The focus group discussions centralized on topics such as defining critical race theory, racism, whiteness, structural and systematic racism, power, privilege, oppression, and white supremacy. Critical race theory and whiteness studies framed the research and research questions while using aspects of storytelling and the Socratic method to approach difficult topics.

Available research on teacher whiteness, specifically pre-service white teachers, provided a guide for constructing this investigation; however, there is a gap in available research on practicing teacher whiteness (Tanner, 2020). In order for practicing white teachers to improve the education for all students, they need to become more reflective of their whiteness and the implications in the classroom (Barnes, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This reflection, and hopefully behavior modification, will shed light on the institutionalized racism in schools that perpetuates white privilege at the disadvantage of BIPOC faculty, staff, and students.

The goal of this study was to address veteran female teacher whiteness, focusing on the power, privilege, and racial bias as a manifestation of whiteness and white supremacy. The research questions that guided the discussions and the study were:

1. What are teacher responses toward examining their whiteness?
2. What are the classroom implications, if any, regarding examining whiteness and how it may impact teaching those who are culturally different?
3. What changes, if any, were made to teacher whiteness when examined?

### **Results**

The first research question was answered with the qualitative data results. The results showed initial responses of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) that manifested as anger, rage, guilt, and deflection. Following initial reactions of white fragility, participants were open to discussion, further probing questions, and thoughtful reflection of their participation in the systematically oppressive education system.

Participants thoughtfully reflected on their initial interactions with BIPOC people and realized these experiences shaped their expectations and understand of what it meant to be non-white. Participants uncovered unconscious biases they did not know they held and better understand a bit of how misinformed they had been on the prevalence of racism around them. Participants commented on how much they learned about the systematic white privilege that marginalized Black and Brown students, faculty, and staff within society and the case study location. Several participants expressed a desire to learn more, asking for additional reading material and asking for the principal to purchase additional material for department chairs for the 2022–2023 school year.

Further data analysis was limited due to the nature of focus group discussions. While able to understand the collective group understanding and awareness of whiteness, more complex data that could have been obtained through individual interviews was absent in this study. I do not know if qualitative or quantitative findings would have changed significantly if all treatment participants had more in-depth individualized interviews. The indications from the qualitative data suggest that a more individualized examination of whiteness would have been obtained from individual interviews; however, the focus group provided a sense of community and place for discussion of whiteness.

The second research question, what are the classroom implications regarding examining whiteness and how it may impact teaching those who are culturally different, was answered with the qualitative data. While the answers to this research question were not as robust as the first question, participants did brainstorm ideas and ways in which to elevate Black and Brown students and small adjustments that can be made in a classroom setting to reduce the amount of racial macro- and microaggressions inflicted upon BIPOC students.

The third research question, what changes, if any, are made to teacher whiteness when examined, was answered with the quantitative data results. The results showed a statistically significant change between the pre- and posttest mean scores of the treatment group overall score. A correlated means t-test was used to measure the within-group variability between the pre- and posttest administration of the CoBRAS survey. Additionally, the subcategory of unawareness of racial privilege, a manifestation of whiteness, had statistically significant changes with all treatment participants having the



most noticeable change in this area. The depth of qualitative data confirmed a deeper understanding of white privilege. Qualitative measures indicated participants uncovered a deeper understanding of unearned skin privilege and the hierocracy of colorblind ideology.

The use of administrator interviews was intended to triangulate quantitative and qualitative findings. However, the white male administrative team was able to provide very little insight or outsider perspective into the treatment group participant whiteness. None of the interviewed administrators had conducted any classroom observations during the data collection and were unable to speak to any possible, visible changes to teacher practice or student/teacher interactions. While administrators provided anecdotal explanations to the changed teacher behavior, there were no first-hand accounts available to corroborate and support teacher self-reflections and self-implemented classroom changes.

As stated in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, there was a growing need to examine teacher whiteness and there was sufficient evidence in the literature of pre-service teacher examining their whiteness, none with practicing teachers. However, there is a dearth of research and literature on how to encourage practicing teachers to examine their whiteness, especially without triggering symptoms of white fragility (Barnes, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018, 2021; McIntyre, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The following section provides an action plan for further empowerment of teacher self-reflection and developing skills to combat whiteness within the classroom to foster the promotion of a culturally relevant classroom in a culturally progressive school.

## **Action Plan**

Promoting an awareness of whiteness and its workings within the school system, especially by those who are responsible for a safe and equitable education, should be a top priority for all administrators and educators. Evidence and previous research findings have shown the benefits of facilitating race work among pre-service and now veteran teachers. Based upon the findings of this research, I have concluded that incorporating ongoing monthly or bimonthly professional development for practicing teachers would prove to be a practical, low stress way of implementing and encouraging educators, specifically white educators, to reflect on the impact their race has in the classroom and their perspective of students and the community. To this end, the following action plan will be implemented:

1. A meeting will be coordinated with the district director of assessment and accountability, the individual who oversaw district level IRB and approved consent forms and release of liability forms. While I am not formally allowed to provide copies of this research to district employees and/or administrators due to South Carolina education budget proviso 1.105, I will strongly encourage the district personnel to read through ProQuest and read this research on their own free time.
2. Having received permission from my principal, a small teacher library will be created in the teacher workroom at the school. For now, the majority of the readings that teachers will be able to check-out will have themes of race, whiteness, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Due to proviso 1.105, there can be no formal discussions on critical race theory or race, but providing teachers

resources they can read during their own time is allowed. The teachers who have already borrowed materials will be allowed to return them to the library and continue to check out books at their leisure. I am the school-level professional in charge of maintaining the library, contributing to the library, and the person teachers are instructed to come to when they have questions or wish to discuss things that they have read. The principal has agreed to fund this library with some of his available discretionary budget.

3. I will have a meeting with the principal to discuss possible race-related professional development that can be conducted once proviso 1.105 in the state budget is lifted. Gathering the input from administration will then be used to put together a professional development proposal that can then be used and implemented once state laws and budget regulations are changed.
4. Due to the restrictions of proviso 1.105, I am not allowed to freely discuss the research and findings on district property or during district time, contractual work hours. Instead, I will host a community forum in the form of a coffee shop get together and invite any individual interested in learning about this research to attend. The community forum or coffee shop discussion will take place after school hours and off campus. The coffee shop discussion will explain the research and findings and then provide ample time for questions, answers, and open discussion.
5. Applications for publications and presentations will be made. There is value in whiteness and critical race theory investigations. While I am unable to freely discuss this research in my local school district and community, other

professionals in states that are not as restrictive can continue this research.

Finding avenues in which to share my findings and experience will help the work continue. Outside publications and presentations will allow for the discussion of teacher and school whiteness to continue and will present the findings of this investigation to others who can continue researching in their own communities.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the things that will be done and can be done with the results and findings from this investigation. These are steppingstones in the process that will continue. Once the proviso is lifted, hard copies of this research will be given to school-level administrators, the director of assessment and accountability at the district, and the district-level superintendent. However, at this time and due to the nature of this work, I am unable to explicitly share the findings with my school district.

### **Implications**

The intent of action research was for the research to explain new knowledge and what this will allow the researcher to do (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This action research investigation was emancipatory in nature, being grounded in social justice, and had the ability to transform participants through critical self-reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The knowledge the participants gained through the research altered their perspectives on the community, school-level personnel, and themselves.

Several of the participants discussed beginning steps in meaningful transformations in classroom pedagogy and student interactions to be more culturally relevant. As the case study location has a growing Hispanic population, Participant 2 vowed to begin learning Spanish. As a way of dismantling her white privilege and

superiority in the classroom setting, she found a racial microaffirmation in beginning to learn small phrases of Spanish to better communicate with her students and using Google Translate to translate portions of her summative assessments into Spanish. Solorzano and Perez Huber (2020) defined racial microaffirmations as “event(s) that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur whenever people wish to help others succeed” (p. 85).

In addition to beginning racial microaffirmations, two teachers requested additional reading. Participant 1 asked for reading on racial microaggressions to better understand the concept and Participant 2 requested to borrow Beverly Tatum’s (2017) *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* As these two participants became aware of their whiteness and racial privilege, they began to want to better understand racism and independently wanted to further their understanding. They have the hope to better understand their students and modify classroom instruction to more effectively meet the needs of all students.

Additionally, participants engaged in meaningful race discussions with individuals outside of the discussion group but not in the treatment group. These water-cooler conversations delved deeper into the understanding of race within the classroom and the community. These outside conversations were a product of self-reflection and content area inquiry on how to better inform instruction and best practice to meet the needs of more students, not just the white ones.

The knowledge I gained through critical self-reflection and open discussion with the focus groups transformed some of my practices and perspectives as the intervention

and discussion disrupted my views of my community, my peers, and my school. I see with greater clarity the rampancy of white supremacy in my community and its very recent “sundown town” past. Through critical self-reflection I saw the magnitude of my community outsider perspective. As a relatively new hire to the school, I did not understand the magnitude of what my BIPOC students, peers, and community members are overcoming nor the risk my coworkers were taking by participating in this investigation. This hindsight clarity had me oversimplifying race and whiteness in my community and oversimplifying the findings and revelations that would be had by my participants.

This intervention and dialogue between me and participants ran much deeper than I initially thought. Participants asked tough questions of themselves and of me, which had all of us examining our whiteness on a deeper level and truly acknowledge the benefits of being white and how much of this we were honestly comfortable giving up. Growing up under the guise of everyone being equal and colorblind ideology was very challenging to overcome because of the inherent power and ease that has accompanied being white.

Conversations among participants looked different in each focus group and in hallway conversations. At times, participants were comfortable in large-group discussions where individuals took turns talking with me as the moderator, making sure everyone had an opportunity to voice their reactions, reflections, and personal experience. Other times, participants wanted one-on-one conversations with each other or me in the hall after they had reflected on dinner table conversations with their significant others or topics that had been discussed at a previous focus group.

There was no one-size-fits-all for race discussions. Through my self-reflection, I realized that my initial intent of this research was oversimplified and isolated to discussion group conversations. As I applied my intervention plan, I witnessed participants developing true interest in understanding whiteness and desire to better understand racially charged axioms (colorblindness, “they just need to work harder,” “I did this all by myself”), which was refreshing and invigorating for my own personal race work journey.

I believe these experiences allowed these veteran teachers to begin to feel and understand their inherent privilege in being white, the racial injustice that many students have had to face their entire lives, and the segregated past of the community that still looms in the present.

The implications of my intervention findings open the door for teachers to examine their whiteness, discuss their reflections with others, and engage in conversation surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy for all students. Rather than requiring students to assimilate to the whiteness of teachers, these discoveries and alterations to teacher outlook and behavior allow students to more freely engage in their educational experience.

When teachers recognize the implications of their privilege and conceptualize ways to diversify their instruction and reduce the white supremacy within their classrooms and community, they neutralize aspects of their inherent privilege for the benefit of students. As an educator, I saw the empathetic nature of my peers and their desire to do good and do right by students, often embracing discomforting and upsetting

aspects of themselves. These teachers and I were willing to undergo critical self-examination and alteration to align aspects of practice and student interaction with firmly held personal beliefs: All students are entitled to a fair and equitable education.

### **Limitations**

As this research was an action research study, it was in no way indicative of all small communities. This research was never intended to be generalizable, and therefore the conclusions and findings cannot be extrapolated from this setting and applied to others.

As the understanding of race and what it means to be white and/or BIPOC continue to change, the results from this research need to be read and understood within the context and time period during which the research was conducted. While emancipatory in nature, the needs of schools and communities vary and this same action research investigation in different areas would yield different results and have discussion relative to the particular setting.

Additionally, the white experience of females in a small, politically polarized community cannot be applied to all white people, as the white experience varies (Barnes, 2017). The findings of this study are limited to these participants and cannot be applied to others, as no other individual has the same personal experience. More specifically, the findings of these veteran white female teachers cannot be applied to veteran white male teachers. Male educators hold more social power in their gendered status than these women participants did not possess. Further, given the racially charged past and present



in South Carolina, these findings are limited to the context in which they were found and cannot be applied to other areas of the United States or world at large.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several research studies could be conducted to further the understanding of veteran teacher whiteness as an extension of the current research. The first is a replication of this study at a different case study location to determine if different findings are possible. The case study location is the smallest, most rural school in a large suburban school district in South Carolina. The case study location had an 80% white student population and an approximately 90–95% faculty white population. Replicating the study at a larger, more diverse location could potentially yield different findings that could deepen the understanding of whiteness within specific locations. Does the student or teacher demographic along with location of the school affect the classroom implications of whiteness and are there different responses to having whiteness examined in different locations?

Additionally, based on qualitative findings from the principals and several treatment group participants, findings could vary if the pool of participants was opened to include white males. As was noted in the administrative interviews, there are several white males at the case study who are the perpetrators of racist and sexist comments routinely made to faculty, staff, and students. By including white males in the examination of whiteness, quantitative and qualitative findings could deviate from those of white females.

Additionally, results from this study indicated the need for faculty to participate in ongoing training to facilitate white teacher reflection on white supremacy and racism within schools. Faculty expressed initial ignorance to the systematic racism of the community and school but later began to express the desire to continue learning about racial disparity within the schools and culturally responsive means to combat the disproportionate power bestowed upon white people. Continued education coupled with ongoing self-reflection are cornerstones to better understand the implications of white racial identity and its impact on Students of Color (Quaye, 2012).

While several participants welcomed and encouraged regular school- and district-level professional development about race, power, privilege, and oppression within the schools, current state-level education funding provisions prohibit the organized discussion of race and critical race theory within the school day or be openly sponsored/supported by school districts.

At this time, there is no possible way for school- and district-level administrators to foster racial understanding without district-level financial penalty and potential employment termination. However, in other states where there are not as restrictive guidelines surrounding race work and critical race theory, further research could be conducted to better understand whiteness over a sustained period. The results from this study indicated a need for faculty and staff education on white supremacy and racism within the schools.

While school- and district-level administrators are limited in their ability to provide professional development under proviso 1.105, I will remain available to

participants who would like to continue the discussion of whiteness, white privilege, and culturally relevant pedagogy. As several participants have already inquired about race-related topics and inquiries after the conclusion of the discussion, a continued open dialogue and self-reflection are necessary for continued racial awareness and growth. As Quaye (2012) found, white people are uniquely positioned to discuss whiteness and facilitate these discussions in predominantly white settings. As a white female in a predominantly white setting having gained the trust of these participants, I am uniquely situated to continue these discussions without violating proviso 1.105.

### **Summary**

This study resulted in a statistically significant change in teacher whiteness and unawareness of racial privilege, colorblind ideology. The qualitative data results confirmed the quantitative findings. Participants uncovered unconscious racial bias, and the unearned and inherent privileges of their whiteness. Several participants noted how much they learned about the marginalization of Black and Brown people at the hands of white power and privilege and expressed a desire to continue to learn more about whiteness and how to be more culturally cognizant and responsive to BIPOC students.

In addition to changes in study participants, I experienced an improvement in my culturally responsive teaching and examined my whiteness with the treatment participants. During this investigation, I experienced backlash from white male peer teachers as my break from white solidarity caused a negative response from these individuals. I was called inappropriate names behind my back to the principal and others, harassed in my own classroom by other white peers, and had derogatory remarks made about my perceived political affiliation. All of these negative responses from fellow

white professionals were in response to my break with white solidarity and investigation of teacher whiteness. While these instances were uncomfortable and inappropriate, they shed further light on the immediate need for examining teacher whiteness and extensive professional development at the case study location.

Additional research suggestions were made to better understand the whiteness phenomenon in practicing teachers. These additional avenues of research can include examining other case study locations to see if other schools mirror similar findings, including white males in research studies to see if qualitative and/or quantitative findings vary, and continuing a sustained professional development experience to see if reduction of whiteness can be sustained over time or produce even lower.

While white supremacy and color blindness ideologies remain fixed in modern culture, measures and steps can be taken to minimize the effects of whiteness and remove the veil that clouds white perspectives. Race work is ongoing and needs to be constantly monitored and perspectives adjusted because understanding the context of race is not a fixed element. For the duration of this study, the hard race work of understanding the inherent value of white skin and the hurdles those without it have begun for a handful of educators. While some are continuing the journey independently, it's safe to say, they were all changed, at least for a little while.

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## APPENDIX A

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The following list of questions was used as an outline for the focus group questions.

Where appropriate, the interviewees were asked to expand upon their answers.

All focus group questions are taken from Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. These questions are from the discussion sections at the end of each chapter.

#### Focus Group #1 Guiding Questions

1. Many sociologists say that in part how we come to know ourselves is by knowing who we are not. Sociologist Charles Cooley described this process as the "looking glass self" to capture the idea that it is what others reflect back to us that teaches us who we are—that is, our ideas about ourselves are based on how we see ourselves (people like us) in relation to others (people not like us). What kind of people did you learn were different from you? In which ways were they different? How were you taught about this difference? (pg.48)
2. According to the authors, all people have prejudice and all people act (discriminate) based on their prejudices. What is necessary in order to minimize the effects of our (discriminatory) actions based on our (prejudiced) ideas about social groups? (pg. 57)
3. How do people often respond when their prejudice is pointed out? (pg. 59)

4. The authors argue that privilege is not the product of luck, happenstance, or natural occurrence. If it is not these things, then what is it? (pg. 100)
5. Identify an aspect of privilege that makes you uncomfortable to think about. Why is it uncomfortable? (pg. 100)

#### Focus Group #2 Discussion Questions

1. The authors argue that racism is more than the acts of individual bad people. What, then, is racism? What is problematic about reducing racism to simply the bad things some people think and do? (pg. 139)
2. The authors argue that to have grown up in racially segregated communities is to learn a great deal about race. How? What kinds of things do we learn? (pg. 139)
3. Track racism today in the context of schooling. What do you notice about the demographics of the student, teaching, and staff populations? School calendar and other events? Funding levels and sources? (pg. 139-140)
4. Think about the primary places you live, work/learn, and take leisure. How racially diverse are these environments? Do people tend to have close relationships across groups? (pg. 140)
5. How racially diverse are the people in leadership positions in your environment? How informed and concerned do they seem to be about racial inequity? How is this concern or lack thereof conveyed? What have been the outcomes of any concern they might have expressed? (pg. 140)
6. What is Whiteness? The authors claim that Whiteness is organized globally. How? (pg. 152)

7. What do the authors mean when they use the term White supremacy? How does White supremacy manifest in institutions? (pg. 152)



## **APPENDIX B**

### **ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Interview questions are guided and adapted from Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017)

*Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education.*

These questions are from the discussion sections at the end of each chapter with additional modifications for specifics to the case study location and research participants. During the interviews, administration will not be privy to know which individuals are in the treatment group and control group but will know the individuals participating in the study.

1. When tracking racism today in the context of schooling, what do you notice about the demographics of the student, teaching, and staff populations? How does this manifest specifically in teachers?
2. How racially diverse is the case study's environment? Do you believe there are close relationships across groups? Why?
3. Do you believe antiracist and Whiteness education is needed at the case study? Explain.

4. Have you noticed a change in study participants while participating in the book study? What changes have you seen?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add about the study participants?  
Disciplinary patterns? Behavioral patterns with students? Engagement?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about the case study?  
Disciplinary patterns? Racial patterns? Behavioral patterns with students?



3. \_\_\_\_ It is important that people begin to think of themselves as American and not African American,

Mexican American or Italian American.

4. \_\_\_\_ **Due to racial discrimination, programs such as affirmative action are necessary to help create equality.**

5. \_\_\_\_ **Racism is a major problem in the U.S.**

6. \_\_\_\_ **Race is very important in determining who is successful and who is not.**

7. \_\_\_\_ Racism may have been a problem in the past, but it is not an important problem today.

8. \_\_\_\_ **Racial and ethnic minorities do not have the same opportunities as White people in the U.S.**

9. \_\_\_\_ White people in the U.S. are discriminated against because of the color their skin.

10. \_\_\_\_ Talking about racial issues causes unnecessary tension.

11. \_\_\_\_ **It is important for political leaders to talk about racism to help work through or solve society's problems.**

12. \_\_\_\_ **White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.**

13. \_\_\_\_ Immigrants should try to fit into the culture and adopt the values of the U.S.
14. \_\_\_\_ English should be the only official language in the U.S.
15. \_\_\_\_ **White people are more to blame for racial discrimination in the U.S. than racial and ethnic minorities.**
16. \_\_\_\_ Social policies, such as affirmative action, discriminate unfairly against White people.
17. \_\_\_\_ **It is important for public schools to teach about the history and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities.**
18. \_\_\_\_ Racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.
19. \_\_\_\_ Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.
20. \_\_\_\_ **Race plays an important role in who gets sent to prison.**

The following items (which are bolded above) are reversed score (such that **6 = 1, 5 = 2, 4 = 3, 3 = 4, 2 = 5, 1 = 6**): **item #2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 15, 17, 20**. Higher scores should greater levels of “blindness”, denial, or unawareness.

Factor 1: Unawareness of Racial Privilege consists of the following 7 items: **1, 2, 6, 8, 12, 15, 20**

Factor 2: Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination consists of the following 7 items:  
3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 16, 18

Factor 3: Unawareness to Blatant Racial Issues consists of the following 6 items: 5, 7,  
10, 11, 17, 19

Results from Neville et al. (2000) suggest that higher scores on each of the CoBRAS factors and the total score are related to greater: (a) global belief in a just world; (b) sociopolitical dimensions of a belief in a just world, (c) racial and gender intolerance, and (d) racial prejudice. For information on the scale, please contact Helen Neville ([hneville@uiuc.edu](mailto:hneville@uiuc.edu)).