Summer 2023

Where Race Has No Place: English Teachers' Efforts to Maintain Space for Diversity in the ELA Classroom

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WHERE RACE HAS NO PLACE: ENGLISH TEACHERS' EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN SPACE FOR DIVERSITY IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2023

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DEDICATION

This work is primarily dedicated to my father, Glenn R. Clark. You are thought of every single day. You and all that you taught me. “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (*Hamle*t, Shakespeare, Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 157-163). It is the readiness, and I get it now, Daddy. This work is also dedicated to my people: my Momma, ClarJean, Madison, Kathryn, Dylan, Raysha-my-Sissy Boo, and crew. I wake up each day to “be good” and “do good” for you; your lives make my peace and joy possible. I love you.

And to Daniel Edison, my husband, my best friend, my Dan-Man, there are no words to capture “this thing.” You already know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will be forever grateful to the three teacher-heroes who participated in this study. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your willingness to take the time to speak to issues in education. Your insight and lived experiences made this study possible.

To Dr. Kimberly Robertson and Aimee Denny, two other "champions of education," thank you for being "you" in my life and helping me to jump start this doctoral journey.

My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Lilly, who employed his wealth of knowledge and expertise to guide me and challenge me to do better work. It is your insistence on telling "the story" as a tool of social and educational reform that will forever guide my professional endeavors. I would also like to thank Dr. McAdoo, Dr. Silvernail, and Dr. Compton-Lilly for serving on my dissertation committee. To Lillian Rutter, you are my forever-mentor.

ABSTRACT

The anti-critical race theory movement began in 2020, propelled by the fear of topics on race and racism overtaking lesson objectives, course content, and class discussion, and, in turn, making some students feel uncomfortable (Duhaney, 2022). Opposition to critical race theory (CRT) and any initiative considered adjacent to the concept, such as the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion, set in motion legislative proposals in nearly every state and enactment in many (Greene, 2022). Anti-CRT regulation of the content and activities teachers can use comes at a time when American student enrollment has never been more diverse (Carrillo, 2022). This research study explored the current tension between distal policymaking that decenters diversity, equity, and inclusion and local efforts to effectively serve diverse student groups. This action research highlighted the perspectives and experiences of three English educators as they reflected on teaching in the era of anti-critical race theory. Findings show that meeting the needs of their students and advancing social justice justify the extra effort they make to maintain diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction in their classrooms.

Key terms: Curricular and instructional decision making, achievement, diversity, equity, inclusion, critical race theory, divisive concepts, culturally relevant education

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT ..... Critical Race Theory

CRP .....Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

DEI .....Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

ELA ..... English language arts

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The demographics of America's public schools are considerably more racially and ethnically varied than in decades past (GAO, 2022). In the late 1980s, over 70% of K-12 students in U.S. public schools were White, and by 2020, that percentage had dropped to less than half (Schaeffer, 2021). By contrast, the proportion of students of color has increased during the last 30 years. Hispanic students make up nearly 30% of K-12 public school enrollment, and Black students represent almost 15% of student enrollment (Carrillo, 2022). The term "diversity" is an awareness of the shifting demographics in the U.S., capturing "differences in social identities [in terms of] age, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, and nationality" (American University, 2023, para. 7). As students show up to American classrooms from a range of backgrounds and an intersection of identities, such diversity is best served with educational equity in mind (Center for Public Education, 2016).

Educational Equity

Advocates for educational equity strive to ensure students' academic, social, and emotional needs are met within their learning environment (National Equity Project, 2023). Educational equity centers on access—access to opportunities, content, experiences, rigor, and relevance that students need in order to be successful (Leute, 2022). To that, educational equity is "access to an education focused on meaningful

learning—one that teaches the deeper learning skills contemporary society requires in ways that empower students to learn independently throughout their lives (Thompson & Thompson, 2018, p. 36; Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit & Pittenger, 2014). Educators achieve equity for their students when they

- design, establish, and maintain diversity-centered campus and classroom environments,
- acknowledge and embrace difference as a strength within the learning community, and
- facilitate positive outcomes for all, regardless of student background or identity (National Equity Project, 2023).

For the English teacher, achieving equitable outcomes for students involves careful "consideration" of curricular choices, instructional strategies, and materials access (Leute, 2022, p. 1). In its position statement titled "Opportunity to Learn," the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2019) suggested that ELA instruction include "curriculum with positive representations of diverse student and faculty populations and accurate information on histories of diverse populations" (para. 4). Aligned to that ideal, the topic of this research study is ELA teachers' experiences incorporating curriculum and instruction that is high-quality, diversity-centered, inclusivity-minded, and educational equity-driven.

The English Classroom and the Culture Wars

The influence of "culture wars" has historically determined what, how, and with whom students learn (Goldstein, 2012). *Culture wars* is defined as the fight over America's identity, values, and ideals (Hunter, 1992). Critical race theory (CRT) is

currently at the center of a culture war. Theorized in legal scholarship decades ago, CRT is used for race-centered social critique, examining racial bias within the legal system and other public entities in America (Kim, 2022; Crenshaw, 1988). Burmester and Howard (2022) explained that the current contention over CRT and broader social reckonings outside the classroom have led to a narrowing of curricula and instruction inside the classroom. That is, anti-CRT policy deters curriculum and instruction that "recognizes, respects, appreciates, and celebrates the rich human differences that make up our diverse societies" (Thompson & Thompson, 2018, p. 42). Sawchuk (2021) suggested the reason for CRT's connection to diverse, inclusive K-12 curriculum and instruction:

> [T]here is a good deal of confusion over what CRT means, as well as its relationship to other terms, like "anti-racism" and "social justice," with which it is often conflated. To an extent, the term "critical race theory" is now cited as the basis of all diversity and inclusion efforts regardless of how much it's actually informed those programs. (paras. 11-12)

The Issue in Context

While curriculum and instruction conflicts arise, such as the controversy over the Common Core standards over a decade ago, an increasing number of students are being affected by legislative and policy restrictions on what and how they learn (Nelson, 2023). Nearly 140 school districts across 32 states banned over 2500 books, impacting nearly four million learners during the 2021-22 academic year (Pendharkar, 2022). In addition to an unprecedented number of books banned during 2021 and 2022, there were over 60 legislative proposals to prohibit the teaching of topics considered contentious (Krebs, 2022). That is, almost every state has introduced legislation regulating content and

discourse around race, ethnicity, gender, and other identity topics in public schools since 2021 (Bissell, 2023). Of the proposed measures prohibiting curriculum and instruction around certain topics, over 42% became law or policy, between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2022 (Alexander et al., 2023). These are district and state mandates seeking "to control teaching and curriculum in the classroom" (Lambert, 2023, para. 2).

Within the State. In the state where this research study took place, anti-CRT legislation passed in the House of Representatives in March 2023. The legislation regulates the way teachers can "discuss racism and sexism in the classroom" (Schoenbaum, 2023, para. 5). The following details are included in the bill:

- Public schools cannot encourage concepts such as the superiority of one race or sex over another or the inherent racism or sexism of a group.
- Teachers cannot expose students to the concept of "white privilege," or that the American system is set up to bestow unfair advantages to White people.
- No lessons can be taught that suggest that individuals bear the legacy of actions committed in the past by members of the same race or sex.
- Meritocracy cannot be promoted as inherently racist or sexist.
- Lesson cannot be taught that suggest America was founded to oppress members of another race or sex.
- Schools must alert the state department of education before providing instruction on the prohibited concepts mentioned in this legislation.
- Schools and districts must alert the state department of education before enlisting diversity trainers, speakers, or consultants who advocate for or who have

previously promoted the prohibited concepts mentioned in this legislation. (Schoenbaum, 2023)

In the Area. At the local level, my role as teacher support affords me the opportunity to hear the concerns of teachers who report being unsure of what they are allowed to teach. Granted, teachers in the districts throughout this region are required to use the curriculum purchased for their content area. Still, most of them are accustomed to the privilege of supplementing the district-adopted material with their favorite novel study or specialty units. Since the onset of the anti-CRT movement, the following scene is common in English/ELA department meetings.

English teachers meet in the conference room for their bi-weekly professional learning community (PLC) meeting. As teacher support, I sit, observe, and take notes on the "glows" and "grows" that each teacher shares. The "glows" are positive situations or outcomes; "grows" are issues or outcomes that need to be addressed. Most teachers report loving the new material offered in the recently purchased curriculum, commenting that the ease of use frees up time to plan and collaborate—a commonly mentioned "glow." The "grows" for all teachers is student engagement. Every teacher asks for support increasing student engagement, especially that of students of color. One teacher says, "Some of these kids completely tune out during the lesson. It's like they hate the story, hate the discussion, hate the activities." I ask, "Is there a particular genre, topic, or theme that seems to repel some students?" Most teachers answer, "No, not really. Kids just say, 'This is boring. Can we ever read stuff about real life?'" To which, I respond, "Oh, I see. This sounds like a relevance issue. Are the texts culturally relevant to your student

groups?" And what I hear is "Yikes, probably not, at least I hope not, since all of that is illegal or restricted now."

Across the country and close to home, anti-CRT laws, policy, and proposed legislation are affecting what is being offered to students. As English teachers strive to empower students to read, think, and write critically as members of an inclusive classroom community, this study probed the realities of recent legislation on that endeavor.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice (PoP) addressed in this study centers on political barriers to employing equitable education practices, such as utilizing diverse, inclusive curriculum and instruction. Such barriers are especially problematic, because there is a significant gap in literacy proficiency between White students and students from minoritized and marginalized backgrounds within the setting of this study. Proficiency rate differences by race and ethnicity reach double digits at most grade levels. In essence, students of color are in critical need of high-quality reading and writing instruction. Research supports cultural relevance and responsiveness as approaches to increasing literacy levels (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). These are approaches that encourage the use of students' diverse backgrounds to make sense of the content, the world around them, and who they are as knowledge constructors (Will & Najarro, 2022). Moreover, a substantial part of ELA teaching is facilitating relevance and responsiveness by wedding students to meaningful literary study. Diverse, inclusive content "provides a site of inquiry like no other for exploring the human condition" and empowers the learner to "read both texts and worlds with a nuanced and critical eye" (Appleman, 2022, para. 2).

Barriers to Curricular Relevance and Instructional Responsiveness

All 50 states have incorporated cultural competence and responsive teaching into their educator standards (New America, 2019). That is, culturally relevant and responsive teaching have been a part of professional development and educator evaluation for years. Now, teachers who seek to meet educator standards in the area of cultural relevance and responsiveness must meander around policy and regulations to find legal and/or permissible ways to do so (National Education Association & The Law Firm Antiracism Alliance, 2022). Though culturally relevant, responsive teaching and critical race theory are not the same, many fear that anti-CRT policy conflates cultural relevance in the classroom with divisiveness (Najarro, 2022b). The concern is warranted; during 2021 and 2022, nearly all 50 states proposed legislation to preempt (override) local curricular and instructional selection authority (Nelson, 2023). In addition to targeting CRT, curricular preemption threatens local school districts in the following way:

> State preemption of schools and school districts is of great concern…These bills target curricula related to Black and Indigenous Peoples of Color, explicitly aiming to prevent any form(s) of culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching in the name of protecting white students, parents, and communities from purported discomfort. (Nelson, 2023, p. 2)

With laws and regulations in place that prohibit diversity-centered, culturally relevant, responsive curriculum and instruction, it is unclear how teachers should go about ensuring educational equity. The existing tension between the mission of schools to provide equitable educational experiences and the agenda of politicians to disrupt equity work intensifies in the English classroom (Will, 2023).

Stress and Confusion

Woo et al. (2022) conducted a research study, titled "Walking on Eggshells—Teachers' Responses to Classroom Limitations on Race- or Gender-Related Topics," that elicited feedback from thousands of teachers across the country. English and ELA teachers reported job-related stress over the "the intrusion of political issues and opinions" more than any other content area, including elementary education and social studies (Woo et al., 2022, p. 7). This finding is troubling yet understandable under the circumstances. Vague curricular restrictions are confusing teachers (Pollock et al., 2022b). Many teachers have turned to administration and teacher support staff for guidance. Amid a growing number of directives and regulations, teachers are being advised to "exercise caution in their choice of words, curricular content, instructional approaches, and activities, cognizant that their decisions could get them fired" (Teitelbaum, 2022, p. 52). Such a climate has clouded teacher autonomy and agency, making some feel pedagogically apprehensive (Burmester & Howard, 2022). That apprehension is especially prominent among English teachers (Woo et al., 2022).

Teacher Support

As teacher support, I play a vital role in facilitating teachers' understanding of district and state mandates regarding curriculum and instruction. Moreover, I am charged with enhancing educator practice, which often entails alleviating professional anxiety and building practitioner confidence. Still, it is the classroom teacher who delivers curriculum. Explaining the essential role of the educator in curriculum and instruction, Alsubaie (2016) stated, "Without doubt, the most important person in the curriculum implementation process is the teacher" (p. 106). It is that importance that creates the need

to better understand teachers' experiences with professional decision-making during the current culture war that is impacting public school classrooms. Exploration of this problem found a gap in knowledge—implications for striking a balance between locally chosen curricula and distally-created policies. To fill the gap, the focus of this research was highlighting what English educators are doing to abide by anti-CRT regulations while maintaining use of diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction.

Statement of Purpose and Research Question

This study aimed to spotlight the perspectives and experiences of ELA teachers navigating the process of making professional decisions that adhere to anti-critical race theory legislation and/or policy. This is research that aimed to explore the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the ELA classroom during the culture war over CRT. Further, this study sought to examine the wherewithal of English teachers to maintain their presence as literacy leaders charged with reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction in a political climate that undermines their autonomy (Sawchuk, 2023). The following question guided the unveiling of and insight into English teachers' efforts to serve the heterogenous literacy needs of their demographically diverse classrooms:

- How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?

A theoretical framework was used to explore and interpret three English teachers' experiences, address the problem of practice, and answer the research question.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework structures a study and offers context into which a problem of practice can be considered (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This research was

framed by two theoretical structures: critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. In educational research, CRT is a framework that leverages racial consciousness to investigate and understand facets of teaching, learning, and student achievement, including debates over who and what are represented in the curriculum (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Alongside CRT, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) centers the significance of culture in education (Brown-Jeffy & Jewell, 2011). Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1988) critical race theory and Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy aided the study by working together in the following way:

> While CRT provides a framework and for some a tool of analysis for examining educational practices and structures that continue to subordinate groups of people, culturally relevant pedagogy offers a model of theory to practice and examples of how such instruction can be delivered. When CRT is related to CRP, the centrality of race to American culture is acknowledged. (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 71)

In essence, students of color and from other marginalized groups should be equipped to perform as well as their peers. Data show they are not (Hanselman et al., 2014). As mentioned before in the PoP section, literacy scores show major gaps in performance between White and non-White students. Howard (2003) insisted that culturally relevant and responsive practices improve outcomes for students of color. Despite the acceptance of cultural relevant and responsive teaching as "best practice" (Byrd, 2016; Larson et al., 2018; Piazza et al., 2015), there is growing discouragement of such equitable practices due to their conflation with teaching critical race theory (Will & Najarro, 2022). As such, the theoretical framework of this research study and the problem addressed within it

justified a closer look at teachers' navigation of equity-erasing policies that potentially exacerbate underachievement.

Critical Race Theory

The connection between critical race theory and education is an important one. CRT in education validates the examination of "the role of education policy and educational practices in the construction of racial inequity and the perpetuation of normative whiteness" (Dixson & Anderson, 2017, p. 122). Within this study, CRT interrogates laws and policies that eliminate or restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the classroom when historically and contemporarily marginalized students continue to fall further behind their peers. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), within CRT, the realities of society are built upon the interchange and internalization of others' experiences. Telling teachers' stories presented an opportunity to recognize and rectify educational injustices that might otherwise be concealed or misunderstood (Delgado, 1990). That is, CRT in education works to unearth the source of educational inequity.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is closely connected to CRT in education in the way that it focuses on race, culture, and student learning. Conceptually, CRP is curriculum and instruction that serve the "academic and social needs of culturally diverse students" (Howard, 2003, p. 195). CRP bears the standard for distinguishing between teaching and learning that is student diversity-centered and that which is not. For this study, CRP anchored this research with its fortifying premise that "every child is entitled to learn" and can learn when policies, systems, and supports are in place "for teachers to

deliver instruction that is relevant to all of the diverse population that inhabits our schools" (Brown-Jeffy & Jewell, 2011, p. 80).

Critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy drove the exploration of educators' experiences making curricular decisions as sociopolitical issues increasingly bear heavily on the ELA classroom. The relationship between the theoretical framework and the focus of the study is indicated in the figure below.

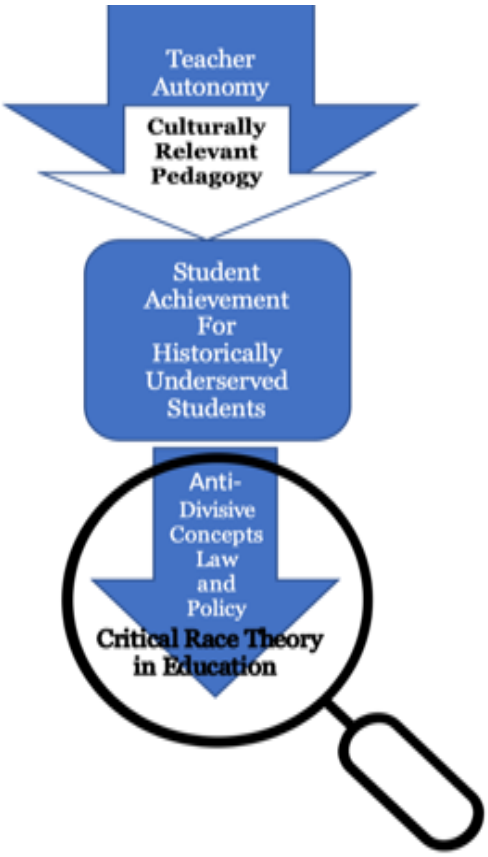


Figure 1.1
Theoretical Framework

Rationale

As the research question indicates, this study explored the experiences of English teachers making instructional decisions in the era of anti-CRT. As the problem of practice discussed and a wealth of scholarly literature suggestions, such a probe was imperative

for several reasons, sheltered under an overarching principle: Students are raced, ethnized, classed, gendered, and oriented in diverse and intersectional ways and are bringing those identities with them into the classroom (Mensah, 2021). Due to trends of disparity, the ferocity of the anti-CRT movement, and the need for culturally relevant education, this qualitative study strove for insight surrounding a problem of practice: English teachers contending with the delivery of a culturally relevant education under culturally repressive regulations.

Disparity

Racial and ethnic achievement inequality has yet to be overcome. Numerous studies document the chronic underperformance of students of color (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Porter (2023) posited that, within the last four decades, achievement disparity has received more attention than almost any other educational topic. To that, the considerable focus on and framing of racial and ethnic performance gaps led Quinn (2020) to examine the impact such coverage has had on perceptions of, stereotypes about, and bias against certain student groups. In short, disparity is a robust conversation in education. Put another way, there is an underperformance problem, and many people are aware. That underperformance underlies unfortunate realities, including limited access to rigorous courses, lower graduation rates, and static future earning potential (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). In ELA, literacy proficiency is a major achievement indicator. “Literacy is one of the strongest predictors of adult success,” yet many graduate from high school along the spectrum of illiteracy (Cheney, 2014, p. 29; Reading, Literacy, and Education Statistics, 2009). As such, there is a need for better programming for students who consistently underperform their peers.

The Anti-Divisive Concepts Movement

Another justification for this study is the movement to smother the reckoning on race, ethnicity, gender, language, class, inequality, and oppression (Sawchuk, 2021). The stance against CRT and the "divisive" concepts thought connected to the theory is a nod for laws that "protect objective, unbiased, and balanced teaching" (Krebs, 2022, p. 1927). Anti-CRT rhetoric maintains that, by obstructing teaching and learning that might awaken personal, social, or historical awareness, students are protected from attempts to divide or indoctrinate (Krebs, 2022). The agency of the school setting, educators, and programming to expose students to multiple perspectives, diverse ideologies, and critical thinking is the real threat for some policymakers and stakeholders (Burmester & Howard, 2022). Moreover, the effort to disrupt DEI culture in schools and prevent social critique in the classroom has been likened to the destruction of the teaching and learning process (Kim, 2021). For the many learners who desperately need to build knowledge, hone skills, and catch up to their peers academically, pedagogical destruction is an especially poignant concern.

Culturally Relevant Education

The demographics of public schools represent an increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds (Carrillo, 2022). Educators have found the diversity within public school classrooms in need of differentiated approaches (Thomas & Berry III, 2019). Deficit thinking and cultural undervaluing are among the reasons scholars developed tools to remove barriers and improve teaching and learning experiences for all (Will & Najarro, 2022). Such approaches and strategies are framed by an "asset-based" paradigm. This is a mindset that respects and appreciates the differences that make

students who they are. An asset-based approach honors "the diversity that students bring to the classroom, including culture, language, disability, socio-economic status, immigration status, and sexuality as characteristics that add value and strength to classrooms and communities" (Office of Teacher and Leader Policy, 2022, para 1). Culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy were developed to strengthened teachers' competence to utilize student diversity in teaching and learning (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). Still, there are some who oppose such approaches, as they believe them to be extensions of critical race theory (Morgan, 2022). As such, this study sought to explore the of dynamics between this kind of educational programming and political influence.

Researcher Positionality

Maher and Tetreault (1993) explained that positionality indicates who researchers are, in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and power, in relation to their participants and setting. Identifying as an experienced ELA teacher, I deeply relate as an insider, feeling as though my time in the English classroom links me to those who are still there (Herr & Anderson, 2015). What is more, I have often pondered how to "grip and engage" my reluctant readers and writers. I've made "risky" curricular choices—decisions to replace the hardly relatable short stories or novels I was asked to teach. Indeed, when benchmark data came back and indicated learning gaps or stalled literacy growth, I made curricular and instructional shifts.

As of late, the roles I have served put me into the outsider category (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Working as teacher support for the last eight years adds a layer of separation from my role as "teacher" in the traditional sense. Recent responsibilities have

included the observation, coaching, modeling, and evaluation of classroom teachers. I have been specifically tasked to gauge their choices in and implementation of curriculum, instructional methods, and formative assessment. There is a natural divide between evaluators and the evaluated. However, none of the participants for this study were educators who I currently observe, coach, or evaluate. I have no direct, daily contact with them.

An English Teacher of Color

My racial and cultural identities are also integrated into my positionality. I am a Black female from the Deep South—born in Little Rock, AR, a few blocks away from the site of the Central High School desegregation showdown of 1957. I was raised by both my college-educated parents in a "traditional," middle-class family and community. My father coached our little league softball team, and my mother was the registered nurse who patched up all of our sports injuries during her years on the emergency room staff. My sister and I attended our mom's "hometown" school system and thrived K-12. This (and more) means that my identity has been developed by multiple factors. Race, region culture, class, and familial support are among those factors and influence my worldview. In all, my view of the world impacts research connected to the underachievement and disenfranchisement of students who look like me. As a Little Rock native, I am no stranger to politically motivated educational oppression. As an English teacher of color, I am enraged by the sweep of books by and about people of color off the shelves of school and public library systems. I fear the fate of culturally relevant teaching and equity efforts that make more students feel safe, seen, and heard. Efron and Ravid (2020) said it best:

the way researchers view the world "implicitly shape…decisions throughout the research process" (p. 54).

Researcher Fear. Significance of positionality surfaced early on in this study. In my experience, training centered on cultural competence was often wrought with uncomfortable, contentious racial moments. I remember colleagues being brought to tears, to rage, and to utter dismissal of all notions of systemic inequality, personal bias, and educational disservice. I believe such professional discussions are necessary for educators because closing the achievement gap is going to require "courageous conversations" (Singleton & Linton, 2006) and more. Still, the probe within this study carried with it the potential for socioemotional heaviness about which I felt a degree of researcher fear. On one hand, I was driven to probe; on the other, I did not want to elicit the degree of discomfort I had witnessed for years during professional learning around race, education, and social injustice. I did not want to hurt anyone or be hurt by the "touching upon race" required with this inquiry. In that way, I can relate in some small way to those who want to avoid sensitive topics such as "race in America."

For Our Students. But I remembered the students. They bring their race and ethnicity, home language and dialect, culture and background with them to school. They cannot avoid it, regardless of how marginalized they feel. And the adults on the scene should not avoid who these learners are either. Working toward the inclusion of all students to take part in learning that builds from who they are and what they know is my life work. This study fit within my life work, so I had to remind myself that, however much I may or may not agree with what I discover, discomfort is a fleeting condition. I reconciled that my participants and I would be a team of practitioners, working for the

benefit of students in this region and possibly beyond. I constantly reminded myself that I was working with them, learning from them, and impacted by them—a position Herr and Anderson (2015) described as practitioners who are open to change in the process of investigation. I was guided by the following self-imposed standard: *Yes, we are English educators. We may have related experiences as English educators. But your story is your story to tell, with no preconception from me. You must not feel that the future of teacher autonomy or student outcomes rests in the disclosure of your truth. I simply want to hear from you and be informed by your experiences, however similar to or different from my own*.

Research Design

As a practitioner striving to improve professional experiences for the educators I serve and learning experiences for the students they serve, my study was situated in action research. Mertler (2020) explained that action research aims to "improve one's own professional judgement and to give insight into better, more effective means of achieving desirable educational outcomes" (p. 14). I attempted this research to better understand the nuances of teacher decision making amid political pressure and constraint. I looked to the perspectives of English teachers as a vital voice in the conversation on curriculum and instruction for equitable access to engagement and achievement. An explanation grounded by the work of John Dewey, Herr and Anderson (2015) asserted that using the professional experience of practitioners as a well of knowledge is a pragmatic approach to improvement. Therefore, my research plan was to seek out ELA teachers from a district within the Southeast region of the United States for qualitative study.

Phenomenology

An approach offered to research methodology by 20th century German philosopher Edmund Husserl, phenomenology centers on lived experience (Groenewald, 2004). I looked to phenomenology as a fitting method to seek the essence of English teachers' current experiences with and perceptions of curricular decision making. As a qualitative approach, new insight was gained by drawing as near as possible to the phenomenon of study through the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data from the experiential stories of fellow educators (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Brene′ Brown (2010) suggested that stories are "data with a soul" (1:05). That is what I sought. I wanted to highlight real thoughts, feelings, and experiences of these teachers. That is, I wanted to know more than what quantitative data might have provided, such as how many teachers felt impacted by the anti-CRT movement or the titles that had been shelved in fear of retaliation. I wanted to capture the essence of the educator's soul at this moment in time, as they navigate yet another "student first" movement.

Hermeneutics. Martin Heidegger, a philosopher, theologian, and Husserl contemporary, was also interested in understanding the lived experience (Laverty, 2003). However, Heidegger believed that interpretation was part of the human spirit and that our understanding of our experiences is a function of interpretation (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics refers to the exercise of interpretation, in which knowledge and insight emerge from interpretation-based understanding (Dyer, 2010). For Heidegger, hermeneutics justifies interpretation as an essential means to understanding the lived experience (Laverty, 2003). Based on that concept, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this study drove the examination and interpretation of teachers' experiences

to arrive at an answer to the research question: How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?

Participants

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that qualitative research is not appropriate for "generalization" and is best used for "purposeful" insight (p. 96). They suggested "purposive," "non-probability" sampling, or selecting a sample "from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). I chose a criterion-based, typical sample—a roster of participants believed to be typical of a group being studied (Efron and Ravid, 2020). For this study, sampling had to represent teachers who currently teach English, English language arts, reading, or similar language arts content. Additionally, I desired a sample of teachers from a regional school district, since I am familiar with the adopted standard course of study driving instruction. Upon gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I sent correspondence through the U.S. Postal Service to several ELA teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school level asking for their participation. In the event that I did not receive response to the physical invitations, I planned to invite other teachers via their personal e-mail accounts. My goal was to represent six teachers [two teachers from each level—elementary, middle, and high school]. I also wanted the six participants to be demographically diverse. Three teachers agreed to participate.

Data Collection and Analysis

As Efron and Ravid (2020) recommended, I revisited my problem of practice, research question, and the data I needed before selecting collection methods. As previously mentioned in the problem of practice section, the focus of this study is the

misalignment between the mission of English teachers to provide equitable educational experiences and the agenda of anti-CRT politicians to disrupt equity work. To address the problem, this study required data that answered the following research question: "How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?"

Collection

Careful methods selection is crucial in qualitative studies. Teherani et al. (2015) explained that, in qualitative studies, "The researcher is the main data collection instrument," examining what experience "means to the participants studied" (p. 669). I collected data from three sources: an open-ended response survey, a one-on-one interview, and document analysis to answer the research question. An autoethnographic narrative was incorporated into the use of a researcher's reflexive journal, which provided a means to bracket and separate my perceptions, preconceived notions, and biases during the study.

Analysis

Phenomenological analysis, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), serves to extract the basics of a phenomenon. For this study, that extraction entailed oscillating between description and interpretation to examine, compare, and make sense of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon initial analysis, data was organized by fixed codes that were based on the theoretical framework (Stuckey, 2015). I sought theme emergence of participants' experiences, in a process that cycled reading and review, annotation and summarization, and meaning making and interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The

data collection and analysis process and other methodology details for this study are discussed in Chapter 3.

Summary of the Findings

Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and Crenshaw's (1988) critical race theory facilitated the interpretation of this study's findings. The findings indicate that making curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive requires critical cognizance of beyond-the-classroom forces that impact teaching and learning, continuous professional learning, intentional efforts to offer multicultural literary experiences, circumnavigation of monocultural curriculum, and a commitment to meeting students' needs. Participants recounted stories and shared perspectives that highlight what is involved in their service to their diverse student groups, despite the political movement to evade equity work in the classroom.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

What comes from qualitative research is the true fuel that we need as educators, practitioners, and transformers to power change and improvement. In this regard, qualitative inquiry, and this study in particular, gives rise to what Bryk (2015) termed "change ideas" that are "based on evidence from what actually happens" (p. 7). My work revolves around promoting teacher quality, growth, and improvement through meaningful, impactful advice and coaching. An area that is growing increasingly confusing is what constitutes regular inclusion of relevant content and learning activities that are culturally diverse and what stands as deep indoctrination of anti-American sentiment and pro-division agenda that are restricted or illegal. While the media has covered the culture war over critical race theory extensively, what is less featured is the

way in which teachers experience instructional decision making amid such sociopolitical contention. Miller et al. (2020) posited that there is agency in truth to "achieve educational equity by giving voices to silenced and marginalized populations aimed at informing and educating" those whose perspectives need expanding (p. 273). My perspective needed expanding in order to continue offering meaningful teacher support. Moreover, this action research was authentic to my professional challenges and should not be considered a generalizable set of findings. However, for those educators who are tasked with supporting ELA teachers' curricular and instructional choices, the hope was that, by reading my study, change ideas will emerge.

A limitation in this study surrounded the nature of interpretation. Smith and Osborn (2007) suggested that research based on the interpretation of qualitative data carries with it the responsibility of deriving meaning from the multiple facets of human essence—thoughts, feelings, memories, and language. While the potential for keen insight and perspective is possible in qualitative research, the challenge for me, the researcher, lay with aptly construing, inferring, and interpreting data collected from participants. An additional data collection method, such as a focus group interview, may have built more confidence in the interpretations.

Sample size proved another limitation of the study. While no more than five or six would have been a manageable number of participants, the greater the number of diverse perspectives, the greater the potential for inclusive representation of English/ELA/literacy practices. After all, there is no one English teacher voice, a notion similar to that of Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy's assertion that, "There is no non-white voice" (Delgado, 1990, p. 97). One voice does not nor could not represent a range of

perspectives. Yet, to represent a range of subpopulations, my sample size would have increased beyond what could be efficiently and effectively managed. Insomuch as ELA teachers navigate the political pressure in the form of challenges, bans, and "curric script" (scripted curriculum), the experiences of English teachers in this era of anti-critical race theory has been fused into a common "voice."

Organization of the Dissertation

The introduction to the topic and an overview of the problem in this first chapter are followed by four chapters, each addressing components of the study. Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature connected to the topic of this study for contextualization, with an emphasis on the theoretical framework that supported this research. In Chapter 3, methodology for this research is explained; Chapter 4 follows with a review of the data and illumination of the findings. The last chapter is devoted to discussion of the results, implications for ELA teacher support, reflection on the study's methodology, and recommendations for further related studies.

List of Definitions

Achievement Disparity: Achievement disparity in education refers to the gap in academic performance and outcomes between or among groups of students (Ansell, 2004).

Critical Race Theory: In education, critical race theory, based on the 1980s work connected to legal scholar Derrick Bell, is a lens of examination through which appraisal of educational practices, policies, and visions centers around the impact of white supremacy and racism (Roithmayr, 1999).

Culture: Culture is held as a set of characteristics, values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors endorsed and shared by members of a social group (Prinz, 2020).

Cultural Competence: Cultural competence reflects an alignment of attitudes, behaviors, practices, and policies that enables a person or system to effectively engage cross-cultural situations (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2021).

Culturally Relevant Education: Culturally Relevant Education is based on the foundational work of two researchers: Geneva Gay (2000) and Gloria Ladson-Billing (1995). It is a conceptual framework combining two areas of focus: pedagogical philosophy and teaching practices (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Diversity: Diversity describes the quality, status, or dimension that represents difference in categories such as, race, ethnicity, nationality, language, gender identity, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, age, and ability (Silverman, 2010).

Divisive Concepts in education: Divisive issues within the context of public schools include concepts that are generally considered "problematic" to explain to students because they are centered on "political, moral, and sociological beliefs about aspects of race, gender, sexual identity, and oppression" (Stitzlein, 2022, p. 596).

Equity-driven/equity-focused: Equity in education entails accessible opportunities to engage, participate, learn, and develop regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, or socioeconomic status. Equity-driven/focused-efforts promote equal access to those opportunities (Jurado et at., 2020).

Ethnicity: Use of the term "ethnic" or "ethnicity" has evolved over time to refer to various categorizations of groups. Generally, an ethnic group is a set of people who are grouped by their shared set of cultural and historical distinctions (Hamer et al., 2018).

Hegemony: Cultural hegemony describes a context in which those with the most power and influence in society dictate what is real, of value, and normal in a culture (Zaidi et al., 2016).

Instructional Text: Instructional texts are texts used to facilitate student learning at any grade level within any content area. Instructional texts may include but are not limited to physical textbooks, novels, online documents, news articles, and trade books (Hruby et al., 2019).

Meritocracy: As a social construct, meritocracy consists of those who enjoy success based on their talent, ability, and effort, with no regard to power or privilege. Meritocracy is also used to describe the condition under which a person advances and succeeds (Mijs, 2015).

Multiculturalism: Multiculturalism is a framework that endeavors to weave recognition, understanding, and appreciation of different races, ethnicities, classes, and orientations in an effort to escape a monocultural society (Moawad, & Shoura, 2017).

Race: Defining race is a challenge in science and research. A couple of centuries ago, race was defined biologically, or based on physical characteristics people were born with such as skin and hair color. Over the years in the United States, the federal government has categorized race in a range of ways, from White-Black-Indian to ancestral-based references such as European American, African American, or Pacific Islander (National Research Council, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Panel on Methods for Assessing Discrimination, and Committee on National Statistics, 2004).

Students of color: Students of color “include those who are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and of Two or more races” (Condition of Education, 2022).

Systemic Racism: Systemic racism is an arrangement of rulings, laws, and regulations authoritatively endorsed that favor certain groups in a society and entitles them to rights, power, and privilege denied to other groups. In America, some reference the domination of Indigenous people, the enslavement of Black people, and the disenfranchisement of immigrants from certain countries as evidence of systemic racism (Yancey-Bragg, 2020).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As introduced in Chapter 1, this qualitative, action research study explores three public school English teachers' experiences making curricular choices for their diverse classrooms in an era of anti-critical race theory sentiment and policy. Chapter 2 examines literature connected to the ideas, concepts, and theories surrounding the problem that instigated this study. Beginning with a broader explanation of the problem of practice, followed by the purpose of the study and theoretical underpinnings, this chapter reviews the literature associated with the topic and focus of this action research.

Problem of Practice

My problem of practice centers around the existing tension between two opposing agendas. English teachers are charged with facilitating literacy proficiency. Ambitious politicians are committed to rallying their base. Teachers employ equity-centered approaches to facilitate literacy proficiency for their diverse groups of students. Politicians use fear-based platforms to ignite concern around an issue. Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching are equity-driven frameworks designed to improve the facilitation of literacy proficiency for historically and contemporarily marginalized students. Anti-CRT legislation and policies connect educational equity efforts to critical race theory. The national uproar against critical race theory has resulted in many anti-racism and school district equity initiatives being banned or thrown into question in the 17 states that passed anti-CRT laws. Even in states that have not enacted these laws, parents and community members have flooded local school board meetings to

oppose curricula that touch on race, racism, sexuality, gender identity or library books that include those topics (Pendharkar, 2022, para. 4). For teachers across the country, including the three participants in this study, anti-CRT policy compromises their sense of autonomy and approval to ensure educational equity through their choices of curriculum and instruction (Superville, 2023). Those two agendas equate to a problem of practice: uncertainty around the legality or permissibility of making curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what English teachers are doing to make diverse, equitable, and inclusive content and activities available to their students within the context of the current culture war over critical race theory. The following is a review of the factors driving this research study:

1. Modern classrooms are filled with students with diverse identities and backgrounds (GAO, 2022).
2. Multiculturalism is the demographic reality of many American public schools (Carrillo, 2022).
3. Eurocentrism is the dominant culture of America and the systems within it, including school systems (Dixson & Anderson, 2017).
4. Students belonging to non-Eurocentric cultures often academically underperform students from Eurocentric cultures (Hanselman et al., 2014).
5. Educational equity efforts, such as utilizing culturally relevant and responsive approaches to curriculum and instruction, work to improve academic outcomes for students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Howard, 2003).

6. Anti-CRT legislation and policies ban the teaching of critical race theory and limit or prohibit concepts conflated with CRT, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, anti-racism, and culturally relevant education (Kim, 2021).
7. Vague anti-CRT policies diminish educators' understanding of which educational equity efforts are permissible (Pollock et al., 2022b).
8. Confusion around anti-CRT policy threatens diversity, equity, and inclusion-driven initiatives for and service to the multicultural student groups in America's K-12 classrooms (Will & Najarro, 2022).

This study endeavored to gain the practitioner's perspective on the banning of "divisive concepts" from the classroom. To supplement what is known about managing teacher autonomy and agency amid top-down policy making that threatens educational equity, the following question drove the research:

- How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?

Literature Review Methodology

Intent on fully understanding the nature of racial and cultural concepts in the classroom, this review was begun with a reading of *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools b*y Tyrone C. Howard (2010). From the concepts and research presented within Howard's work, university access to EBSCO powered the search for scholarly work on achievement disparity, teacher efficacy, responsive teaching, and other ideas related to race, ethnicity, culture, and education. The related work of Antonia Darder, Parker Palmer, and Thomas D. Wilson emerged during the search. Additionally, JSTOR provided a swift sweep of various writing related to scholarly literature on critical race

theory in education, cultural relevance in the classroom, multiculturalism, and teacher autonomy. I also used ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis Online, and Sage Journals to review writings from Gloria Ladson-Billings, Linda Darling-Hammond, Geneva Gay, Christine Sleeter, James A. Banks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and other social justice scholars. In all, this literature review incorporates book excerpts, textbooks, web-based journal articles, and ERIC-powered peer reviews to canvas the literature situated around this topic.

Theoretical Framework

The literature review was aided by the scholarly work on critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. The use of these theories served in fleshing out the connection among teacher autonomy and agency, student performance, educational equity, and political power. That is, the theoretical framing for this study indicted "schooling practices that perpetuate Whiteness through … narrowly constructed curricular content" (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 3). It is through the lenses of these theories that scholars, researchers, educators, and policy makers better understand both the pathways and the obstacles to equitable, inclusive, multicultural, multi-perspective learning experiences in the public-school classroom.

Critical Race Theory

Carbado (2011) wrote "critical what what" to capture the experience of making sense of critical race theory (p. 1593). Moreover, the mere mention of or allusion to the term is not enough to render full comprehension, evident by Fox News's nearly 2000 references to CRT in less than four months during 2021 (Elnaiem, 2021). Even with wide media coverage and household-name recognition, many are still unaware of the substance

within its framing (Morgan, 2022). To understand critical race theory is to understand its beginnings, what it is, and what it is not.

History of CRT. Though Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "critical race theory," the genealogy of critical race theory traces back to Derrick Bell, referred to by many as "father of the CRT movement" (Elenbaas, 2022). His work first challenged the master narrative of justice-for-all in American law (Hoag, 2020). Before his scholarship and critique of the impact of Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s on social progress during the 1970s and 1980s, many believed that American law played no role in nurturing racial hierarchies (Bridges, 2021). Critical race theory was fleshed out from the critical exploration of legislated inequality (Crenshaw, 2011). It is an ideology formulated by scholars including Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Cheryl Harris, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda (Elnaiem, 2021). CRT is centered on the implications of race in America and driven toward social justice for all (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

CRT Framers. Crenshaw (2011) described the context of CRT's beginnings as a Summer 1989 convention at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There were nearly 25 legal scholars of color, all of whom were "veterans" in "particular institutional conflicts over the nature of colorblind space in American law schools" (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1263). The meeting of minds was precipitated by the 1982 eruption over Harvard Law School's lack of racial and ethnic diversity seemingly demonstrated in the following ways:

- Near exclusion of tenured people of color
- A make-shift course to replace Derrick Bell's *Race, Racism, and American Law*

- Bell's replacement course taught by two white Civil Rights scholars [as, apparently, no qualified scholar of color could be found.] (Matsuda et al., 1993)

Six years after the Harvard Law School showdown with the dean, the framing of CRT began (Crenshaw, 2011). The CRT framers were

> individual law teachers and students committed to racial justice [who gathered] …to talk, to write, and to engage in political action in an effort to confront and oppose dominant societal and institutional forces that maintained the structures of racism while professing the goal of dismantling racial discrimination. (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 3)

Derrick Bell. However, it was well before that convening of thought and the formal conception of CRT, that Derrick Bell began to believe that racism "is so deeply rooted in the makeup of American society that it has been able to reassert itself after each successive wave of reform aimed at eliminating it" (Cobb, 2021, para. 4; Bell, 1980). It was from this notion, along with the early work of legal scholars Alan Freeman and Richard Delgado, that critical race theory was developed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Ladson-Billings (2013) stated succinctly about CRT: It is a proclamation that racism is the rule, not the exception—a principle believed to be what truly distinguishes the critical race theorist from others who study race. In other words, racism is so tightly woven into every fiber of American life that it is strong enough to resist any attempt to unravel it. Expounding on Bell's proposition on the insidiousness of racism, Crenshaw (1988) described "reform" and "retrenchment," as a one-step-forward-two-steps-backward analogy of the gains made for people of color that are drown out by subsequent tides of sanctioned backlash (p. 1331). The birth of critical race theory delivered a framework of

interrogation of the impact of race and racism in relation to social capital inequities among the different racial groups (Hiraldo, 2010).

Essentially, Harvard Law School and its resistance to hiring scholars of color and offering legal studies centered on issues of color set in motion the cross-examination of prominently white schools of thought, ways of knowing, and aspects of excellence (Carbado, 2011). Further, an "interest in exploring race outside the context of the Civil Rights Movement," "a broader inquiry into the relationship between race and law," and "a critical interrogation of traditional legal education" conceptualized critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1279).

The Tenets. The theory raised a set of abiding themes. Critical race theory posits about the way the United States constructs racial identity along the spectrum of Whiteness:

1. Race is a social construction and not based on biological realities.
2. Racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture.
3. Systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy.
4. The lived experiences of people of color are valuable to scholarship. (Cobb, 2021; Crenshaw, 1988)

What It Is. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) stated that CRT is a movement "of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 2). Critical race theorists clinch multiple perspectives and the partiality contained within them and embrace political action (Matsuda et al., 1993).

The following is associated with the agenda, philosophy, and efforts of critical race theorists:

> Our work is both pragmatic and utopian, as we seek to respond to the immediate needs of the subordinated and oppressed even as we imagine a different world and offer different values. It is work that involves both action and reflection. (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 3)

Rather than a movement against a particular group of people or entity, critical race theory maintains that the United States lacks the structure to address the issues of its diverse peoples because it was built to accommodate the interests of the dominant group (Benson, 2022; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical race theory is

- an intellectual framework developed by legal scholars to explore the role race and racism play in American systems and institutions (Dixson & Anderson, 2017),
- a social paradigm constructed to dismiss the notion that racism and discrimination are individually practiced and expose them as structural and systemic (Carbado, 2011), and
- a social justice movement designed to transform America's political, economic, and academic condition by illuminating and interrogating ideas around the "valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste" (Harris, 1995, p. 277) and the reality of social progress for people of color only "when it converges with the interests of Whites" (Bell, 1980, p. 523).

What It Is Not. To clarify what is not connected to critical race theory—ideology or practice—one must first internalize the "emergence of a post-truth era" and the dominance of "fake news" (Benson, 2022, p. 4). Morgan (2022) explained one common

misconception about CRT—that it is a theory that blames the White race for oppressing and victimizing people of color. Additionally, despite its recent connection to implicit bias training by the media and in politics, "CRT is not a diversity and inclusion 'training' but a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society" (George, 2021, para. 2). Sawchuk (2021) posited that, while critical race theory functions to eliminate the injustice caused by racism, it does not advance the idea of reverse oppression by limiting the rights of White people to achieve equality. Critical race theory is not

- anti-American, anti-White indoctrination (Weiner, 2021),
- a curricular unit taught in K-12 but rather a "complex framework for viewing America" and its racial realities "introduced to graduate students and law students within the last forty years" (Benson, 2022, p. 9; Pellar, 2021; Streeter, 2021),
- an ideology that purports that a) one individual, race, or gender is superior to another b) discrimination is ever justified c) one race or gender is morally inferior to another d) individuals are accountable for and should feel guilt over the historical actions of others (Gray, 2021).

Insofar as CRT anchors any sociocultural probe into access, equity, inclusion, and opportunity, it is theoretical framing that justified and tooled the exploration of ELA teachers' experience with text selection for representation of cultural diversity amid legislation, policy, and rhetoric against diversity-centered classrooms.

CRT in Education. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) wrote the first article on critical race theory in education, after extensive reading and research on CRT as legal scholarship. Just as CRT in the legal academy served as a vehicle to roam the realities of race, power, and inequality, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) proposed

CRT in education for similar exploration. They stated that educational "inequalities are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47). CRT in education functions in the following ways.

Examines Systems. A key function of critical race theory in education is its critique of what some see as race neutral pedagogy, curriculum, and policy (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Curriculum and instruction, the "what" and "how" of teaching and learning, are the main components of the American school system. Ladson-Billings (1998) explained that "Critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (p. 18). That is, despite the diversity that America has long celebrated as a "melting pot" of peoples from around the globe, K-12 "curricula are primarily based on a narrow, hegemonic view focused on western European cultural norms" (Brand & Tutwiler, 2022, p. 165). Likewise, public schools have historically offered instruction that is absent of a racial slant and thought appropriate for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In absence of the other CRT—Geneva Gay's (2010) culturally responsive teaching—an opportunity is missed to use "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles" of diverse students to enhance their encounters with learning (p. 31). In turn, as race-neutral instruction continues to underserve learners of color, "The students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). However, by examining the systems designed and implemented to serve all students, CRT works to expose the inner workings that perpetuate subpar educational experiences for students of color (Lynn & Dixson, 2013).

Dismantles Constructs. The story of "race in America" and the way it is told through public education have been difficult structures to dismantle. In effect, America's reckoning on race continues, notwithstanding declarations of post-racial status (Love & Tosolt, 2010). From a CRT in education perspective, the motivation behind monocultural curricula that insists on the "stock tale" is power (Burmester & Howard, 2022). "Curricular choices have long excluded and minimized the histories and perspectives of marginalized communities in America" (Nelson, 2023, p. 1). James A. Banks (2002), "father of multicultural education," posited that curriculum and instruction are tightly fastened by the bolt of America's power structure. Further, Banks (2002) lifted the idea that teaching and learning in America function to maintain one dominant view of the world which forces the floundering of all other views. One such veiled view is the modern existence of racism in America. Many believe that racism is isolated (Love & Tosolt, 2010) and that race is no longer a guarantee of nor impediment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Declaration of Independence, 1774). As such, mentioning or acknowledging race—much less grappling with racism—is no longer considered necessary by many (Eddo-Lodge, 2021). Critical race theory works to dismantle those post-racial social constructs (Nelson, 2023). Anti-CRT legislation is believed to be part of a political agenda aimed at "snuffing out schools' efforts to encourage students to think critically about the history and impact of race, gender, and systemic inequality in the U.S." (Kim, 2021, p. 65). While it is not the intention of CRT to elicit "white guilt" from school children over America's racist legacy, it does hold that White supremacy and normativity should be deconstructed (Ray & Gibbons, 2022).

Renders Equity. Improving outcomes for students of color, those who are often marginalized and underserved in American schools, is the intent of critical race theory in education (Yosso et al., 2009). Fueled by the essential premise—racism is the rule not the exception—CRT in education exposes the underpinning of K-12 educational inequities (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Before looking at educational realities through a racial lens, researchers used the lens of either socioeconomics or gender (Lynn & Parker, 2006). However, the authors of CRT explained that the evasion of race, racial difference, and racial history skirts the impact of systemic injustice to racial minorities (Martinez, 2013; Olson, 2003). Ladson-Billings (1998) lauded "the potential of CRT for illuminating our thinking about school inequity" (p. 22). Yet, she cautioned that discussion and exploration alone are not enough to bring about a shift in outcomes for underserved students.

> It is very tempting to appropriate CRT as a more powerful explanatory narrative for the persistent problems of race, racism, and social injustice. If we are serious about solving these problems in schools and classrooms, we have to be serious about intense study and careful rethinking of race and education. Adopting and adapting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing it. (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22)

An update to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) educator standards reflects the "rendering of equity" principle of CRT in education. A "shift in language was meant to be more specific and have educators interrogate whether every aspect of their

instruction—from literature selection to writing prompts—is rooted in an anti-bias perspective," according to NCTE's executive director (Will, 2021, para. 8).

In the previously mentioned ways and others, there is significant applicability of CRT to education. And while CRT-in-education does not denote lessons-on-CRT, fear of the race-centered ideology runs rampant (Pendharkar, 2022). To that, fear-driven backlash in the form of anti-critical race theory legislation has frightened a good deal of autonomy out of public-school educators (Woo, 2022). From an early 2022 survey of principals and teachers from across the U.S., researchers found that "the intrusion of political issues and opinions in school leadership or teaching" impacted their leadership decisions and posed "threats to their instructional autonomy" (Woo, 2022, pp. 5-6). Numerous examples of the effect the CRT culture war is having on public school teachers include:

- A New Hampshire teacher no longer includes a curricular unit on race and economics that connects Jim Crow laws with the wealth divide.
- An Oklahoma school district banned all teachers from using the word "diversity" in their classrooms.
- A Utah principal chose to remove a class from the school's course offerings because one the modules discussed topics such as the Black Lives Matter movement.
- A Florida teacher was terminated for creating a Black Lives Matter-themed classroom.
- A group of school administrators in one Tennessee district agreed on the following message to help inform teachers' instructional decisions: 1) don't

> teach your opinions and 2) if you think it will get you in trouble, don't teach it. (Meckler & Natanson, 2022)

These instances illustrate what one study found. Nearly 900 school districts serving almost 18,000,000 learners, or "35% of all K–12 students in the United States," have been affected by anti-CRT laws or policy as of late 2021 (Pollock et al., 2022b, p. vi). Teachers in the study reported a confusing and "newly hostile environment for discussing issues of race, racism, and racial inequality and more broadly diversity, equity, and inclusion" (Pollock et al., 2022b, p. vii). The result has been a swift return to "largely White and male voices of the traditional literary canon as the primary source of curricular content" (Burmester & Howard, 2022, p. 376). Critical race theory in education foreshadows the impact of shifting away from diverse text and curricular content for more "traditional" selections from the canon: "contemporary forms of racial inequality, which are disguised as 'neutral' and 'objective' structures, processes, and discourses of school curriculum" (Yosso, 2002, p. 93). Further, the application of CRT in education structured the way in which this study drew meaning and implications from decision making experiences in a climate of curriculum and instruction confusion.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Chapman (2013) explained that critical race theory in education works in tandem with culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to challenge the following notions:

1. Every student can be successful with effort and hard work.
2. "Traditional" curriculum is "American" curriculum.
3. "Diversity" is a code word for anti-American, reverse racism.

4. Teachers and curricula must be prevented from indoctrinating and dividing students.

In the way that critical race theory in education facilitates an understanding of educational inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), culturally relevant pedagogy informs a dialectic comparison of what students need and what they typically receive (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 45).

History of CRP. American classroom rosters represent a growing number of students from diverse backgrounds (Schaeffer, 2021). Over the years, some have found the multiculturalism of modern classrooms a challenge to traditional ways of engaging with students (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017). Moreover, performance data suggest that schooling does not work for many students. In addition to gaps in test scores, other indicators show disparity. Graduate rates, attendance, advanced course enrollment, and discipline statistics highlight disparity between White students and students of color (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017). Gloria Ladson-Billings, educator and scholar, pressed past the daunting data to find out what actually works for students of color (Lim et al., 2019). Specifically, her research focused on the knowledge and practices of effective teachers of African American students (Brown & Crippen, 2017). Extending the work of other social-justice-in-education scholars, Ladson-Billings recognized "culture as endemic to students' socialization and ways of knowing, and therefore a fundamental aspect of the learning process of students of color" (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017, p. 6).

In a study that began in 1988 and spanned several years, Ladson-Billings (1995) collected data from eight teachers (five Black and three White) at a low-income

elementary school in California serving a majority-minority population. Participants were chosen because of their successful outcomes with their groups of predominantly Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) procured that list of effective teachers based on feedback from African American parents' experiences and "cross-checked" by principals and other teachers (p. 471). Through analysis and interpretation of the data collected from unannounced observations, interviews, video-tapping and notetaking, and participants' collaborative reflection, Ladson-Billings recognized multiple themes emerging from their practice.

Characteristics. Centering teaching practices on student culture, culturally relevant pedagogy situates student identity and cultural integrity as vital components of an effective learning environment (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2021) described the markers of culturally relevant pedagogy in the following way: effective approaches that insist on 1) academic success 2) cultural competence and 3) sociocultural critique.

Academic Success. Recognizing the anemic state of research on the educational success of students of color, Ladson-Billings (1995) was distinctly focused on achievement and how it was garnered by the group of teachers at the research site. An aspect that emerged from the findings was that "Each of the teachers felt that helping the students become academically successful was one of their primary responsibilities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 475). That mindset translated into what Ladson-Billings described as students' demonstrated ability to read, communicate, engage, calculate, and think critically at the most complex levels (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, this group of predominantly Black students used critical thinking and higher-order evaluative

skills to wrangle with "the nature of teacher-or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 475).

Cultural Competence. Some studies suggest that academic success for students of color is often accompanied by the rejection and denial of their cultural identity, in what many students project as speaking or behaving like White people (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) defined "acting White" within the context of students of color (African American students, in particular) as "exceling in academic arenas which traditionally have been defined as the prerogative of White Americans" (p. 177). Ladson-Billings (2009) revealed that culturally relevant teaching could counter the loss of racial and cultural identity within the White spaces of public schooling by reinforcing the relevance of students' heritage and lived experiences. Miller (2015) explained about CRP: By connecting home, community, and school to curriculum, instruction, and learning, students can enjoy academic success without feeling as though such success compromises their identity.

Sociocultural Critique. Sociocultural interrogation involves the probing and questioning of systems that perpetuate inequality with the intent of dismantling those systems (El-Amin et al., 2022). Further, critical consciousness functions to invite marginalized students into curriculum and instruction and welcomes their backgrounds into the complex thinking and problem-solving process (El-Amin et al., 2022). Along with high expectations for student success and cultural connections to learning, Ladson-Billings (1995) found that guiding learners to "recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities" was apparent in CRP classrooms (p. 476). As culturally relevant teachers should be cognizant of the social justice issues impacting their students, school,

and community at large, their service to students must, Ladson-Billings contended, facilitate authentic connections between curriculum and instruction and opportunities for learners to critique and solve problems in the world outside the classroom (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017).

Essentially, Ladson-Billings (2021) developed culturally relevant pedagogy through observation and interpretation of the lived experiences of stakeholders in thriving educational situations, determining that student success requires

- "fluid" student-teacher interaction,
- teacher "connectedness" with every student,
- learning "community" within the classroom, and
- collaboration and peer ownership of learning. (p. 32)

Surveying over 300 secondary students throughout the United States from diverse backgrounds —25% White, 25% African American, 25% Latinx, 25% Asian— one research study correlated culturally relevant teaching to positive academic outcomes and identity development along racial and ethnic lines (Byrd, 2016). In addition to those students, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that has been found to work for students from a range of backgrounds (Bonner et al., 2008). Santamaría (2009) concluded that CRP and equity-driven methods "are those that consider all learners in a classroom setting and pay close attention to differences inherent to academic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity" (p. 24).

CRP in the ELA Classroom. In practice, race-evasive, colorblind ELA classrooms that avoid "divisive topics" look like this: "sites of cultural and linguistic violence where nonwhite, non-Western ways of knowing, being, and languaging are

delegitimized" (Burmester & Howard, 2022, p. 375). Consequently, many American students experience unidimensional teaching and learning, based on academic programming that only represents the dominant culture (Nieto, 1994). The following summarizes the impact of society and politics on public school ELA classrooms:

> Schools reflect their communities and the larger society. The conflicts over matters of taste in our English classrooms—the rhetorical choices open to student writers, the boundaries and limitations imposed on student reading choices—reflect a larger and ongoing societal battle. (Goodson, 1994, p. 22)

However, culturally relevant pedagogy transforms that which could easily function as a social battleground into a safe space for learning language arts (Will, 2021). Culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for this study informed what is possible [and necessary] in an ELA classroom. Ladson-Billings (2021) summarized the "moves" of a culturally relevant English teacher:

- Empowering students with troubled histories and uncertain futures to become academic leaders in the classroom
- Encouraging students to own the learning environment as their space to share, discover, and grow
- Validating students' lived experiences as part of the literacy experience and legitimate curriculum
- Expanding literacy merit to include reading, writing about, and discussing social realities
- Inviting a shared charge for social justice

- Recognizing oneself as a sociopolitical being with power and permission to participate in the world outside the classroom.

In sum, culturally relevant pedagogy serves as a "best practices" framework for the classroom. For the English classroom, specifically, the body of research establishes a positive increase in academic performance within culturally relevant education (Aronson and Laughter, 2016). Supporting the context of this study, culturally relevant pedagogy as a theoretical framework afforded "issues of political, economic, social, and cultural natures" as welcome additions to the curriculum and endorsed the empowerment of students to "put the learning they gain" from such socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical discourse "to practical use" as an essential component of their literacy education (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 71).

Historical Perspective

America's Reckoning on Race

American history is littered with unjust, violent, and inhumane realities. Like other nations around the globe, the United States is guilty of crimes against humanity (Quarcoo & Husaković, 2021). The Indian Removal Act, the enslavement of peoples descended from African, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II underscore the atrocities incurred on American soil. Impeding the accounting of those realities is "the difficulty that the United States has always had in reckoning with ugly parts of a history at odds with its professed ideals" (Quarcoo & Husaković, 2021, p. 3).

A Republic's Reality

While the legacy and implications of slavery, White supremacy, oppression, and inequality are glaring realities for many, they are not easy truths to internalize. Lowery

(2017) put it succinctly: “One of the most difficult things about talking about race in the United States is talking about race” (p. 114). Still, “race matters” (West, 1994). Moreover, racism is not a plot line that ended in previous chapters of the American story; it is a sad social element introduced to the American narrative many years ago (Cain & Hadden, 2022; Rosenbaum, 2013). Smithsonian (2023) explained that the racial term “white” was used by European settlers to refer to people whose physical features resembled theirs. Beginning in the mid-1600s, the words “race,” “slave,” and “savage” were used to refer to the differences between the White colonists, enslaved persons, and the indigenous people of America (Smithsonian, 2023).

> These elites created ‘races’ of ‘savage Indians,’ ‘subhuman Africans,’ and “white” men. The social inventions succeeded in uniting the white colonists, dispossessing and marginalizing native people, and permanently enslaving most African-descended people for generations. Tragically, American culture, from the very beginning, developed around the ideas of race and racism. (Smithsonian, 2023, para. 7)

A Nation’s Story

Though the reality is that our nation’s story began with race and racism setting the tone, beliefs about race among mainstream America are informed by what most of us learned in school, at home, and within our social circles growing up (Haupt, 2010). The story of the United States of America is told and understood in a very absolute way (Donoghue, 2022).

> *The Indians shared their land and culture with the European settlers. The settlers thanked the Indians by sharing a big meal with them and calling it*

> *"Thanksgiving." Then there was slavery. Abraham Lincoln's Civil War abolished slavery; Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas helped. Jim Crow was about lynchings and lunch counters in the Deep South. The Civil Rights Act freed everyone for good. That made Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks happy. America has been great ever since. Obama's election and Oprah's fame are proof of our post-racial status.*

For many Americans, that *is* the racial story and *all* that there is to know or talk about in terms of race and racism. However, as Pollock et al. (2022a) explained: That racial and cultural relevance is irrelevant because we are now a post-racial nation is a micronarrative that deflects away from critical social ills that have yet to be healed.

The Black Lives Matter Movement

In May 2020, the nation watched via television and over the internet the death of a Black man under the custody of a White police officer. Mr. George Floyd's murder ignited a firestorm of protests over racist violence during the summer of 2020, known to many as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Onion et al., 2021). The BLM movement was, in fact, started by three Black women in 2013 after the Zimmerman acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murder. BLM prevalence resurfaced in 2020 after millions tuned in to the unfolding of the Floyd case (Howard University School of Law, 2023). The BLM movement is considered one of the largest, most diverse social movements in the history of America (Fisher 2022).

Social Solidarity. The months of BLM protests were incited by numerous accounts of anti-Blackness. However, a "First they came for the…" (Niemöller, 1892–1984) spirit awakened within other marginalized groups (Fisher 2022). Martin Niemöller

was a German clergyman who did not oppose the Nazi regime initially. In his statement on failing to speak out against social injustice, he recounts sympathizing with Nazi principles and not fully sympathizing with the oppressed until he landed in Hitler's prisons and concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2023). His evolution from social justice indifference to social justice advocacy has stood as a powerful model for what citizens owe one another in the fight for justice for all.

Everyone-help helps. Not only did the BLM movement hold salience for Black people concerned with racial justice, it mobilized individuals who felt connected to a number of other intersectional issues. Many who joined the movement were "individuals with multiple identities that interacted to affirm group similarities" (Fischer, 2022, para. 5). In sum, mobilization of people from diverse ethnicities and cultures, members of the LGBTQIA community, the young and the old enlarged and diversified the BLM movement.

The Pushback

The anti-CRT movement is considered pushback and retaliation against the wide-spread unity of historically and contemporarily disenfranchised groups during the spring and summer months of 2020 (Pollack et al., 2022). Social unrest over the audacity and privilege exercised by some and the brutality and oppression experienced by others forced the call for critical exploration into social justice issues (Quarcoo & Husaković, 2021). The Black Lives Matter movement, in particular, drew attention to, awakened concern about, and elicited conversation around race, racism, and injustice (Eckart, 2022).

> How people talk about an issue and how often they talk about it can create momentum and bring attention to a cause. They point to civil rights marches, which led to changes in voting and housing rights, and to anti-Vietnam War protests, which helped shift public opinion. (Eckart, 2022, para. 5)

As such, the wide coverage of the deaths of unarmed people and the sustained protests and racial reckoning spurred new or enhanced diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts by businesses, organizations, and schools (Schwartz, 2022). However, racial reckoning and public opinion shifts do not align with the sociopolitical agenda of some Americans (Pollack et al., 2022).

Reverse Racism. With the nation attempting to productively move forward with a renewed focus on anti-racism and equity work, "commentators pushed back, claiming that some of the exercises that asked white Americans to reflect on their privilege were racist and divisive" (Schwartz, 2022, para. 17). Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, was especially outspoken against DEI training and popularized the conflation of anti-racist and diversity work with critical race theory (Gabriel, 2022). In September 2020, Rufo urged then President Trump to end mandatory diversity training in federal agencies in the spirit of opposition to critical race theory and its avowal of reserve racism (Schwartz, 2022). Within weeks, President Trump signed an executive order stripping ideology that is "offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating" from federally funded employee training (Trump & US Executive Order 13950, 2020, para. 15). Without mentioning critical race theory specifically, former President Trump's executive order supplied the sentiment and language for the anti-CRT legislation and policies that are now impacting public schools.

From Trump's Executive Order to Anti-Divisive Concepts Legislation

A key justification for highlighting the experiences of English teachers making instructional decisions is the momentum of the anti-CRT/anti-divisive concepts movement. This is a political push to ban "divisive concepts" in K-12 curriculum. According to former President Trump's Executive Order 13950 titled "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," issues are considered "divisive" if they are an interrogation of America's founding and history or this country's handling of race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, justice, and equality (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Because critical race theory is a tool that magnifies such topics, it is thought to be the source of "divisive concepts" (Robinson, 2023). For opponents of critical race theory and the agitation of "divisive concepts" that CRT is blamed for, their interest in anti-CRT legislation lies in recentering America's public schools on the ideals of the American Dream (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2020).

Reclaiming Education. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is an organization of state legislators credited with casting and scripting the anti-CRT/anti-divisive concepts political movement (Casey, 2021). ALEC included the following blurb leading into a December 2020 webinar titled "Against Critical Theory's Onslaught: Reclaiming Education and the American Dream":

> The 1619 curriculum is infecting our schools. Diversity training is taking over our workplaces. How do patriotic Americans respond? Tune in as the Heritage Foundation has a conversation about the threat of Critical Theory manifesting in society and the important role state leaders play in reclaiming education and the American Dream. (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2020, para. 1)

Jackman (2013) explained that ALEC meets annually for policy discussions. Within these meetings, "ALEC is known for writing model legislation with major industries and then encouraging their introduction – through their legislative partners – in statehouses nationwide" (Jackman, 2013, para. 1). Godlasky (2022) explained that "A copycat or model bill is legislation that's written with the intent to have it replicated in multiple states" (para. 1). An archive of ALEC's model legislation is housed on its website. Along with ALEC, other organizations write model legislation with the same intention: to craft language that busy legislators and policymakers can quickly grab and use to advance an agenda. The Heritage Foundation (2022) offered anti-CRT support stating, "In efforts to stop the insidious tenets of CRT from being taught in K-12 schools around the United States, The Heritage Foundation crafted model legislation that states can adopt" (para. 2). With a unified agenda among former President Trump loyalists, think tanks, donors, and sponsors, CRT has been strategically targeted as a central political issue (Allison, 2021).

CRT: Public Enemy #1. For critical race theory opponents, race consciousness and discourse risk "misrepresentations of our country's history and its role in the world" (Trump & US Executive Order 13950, 2020, para. 4). This fear of misrepresentation of the dominant narrative explains anti-CRT opposition to *The New York Times*'s 1619 Project (Hattem, 2020). This is what its opponents find objectionable:

> The 1619 Project is an ongoing initiative from The New York Times Magazine that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. (The New York Times, 2021)

The New York Times's 1619 Project exemplifies what Trump's executive order decried as critical narrative and conversations about our nation's history, amounting to ideology "rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country" (Trump & US Executive Order 13950, 2020, para. 4). Essentially, the curriculum is one that exposes and tackles the messiness of American history. For critics of social critique curriculum, "the emotionalities of whiteness" overshadow any necessity for racial consciousness or revisits to shameful periods in America's history (Liou & Alvara, 2021, p. 77). And though the 1619 Project is not synonymous with critical race theory, it and programming like it have been subsumed into the decades-old legal theory (Schwartz, 2022). In a recent interview, Ladson-Billings asserted about the demonization of critical race theory: There is an attitude of "…if I hate it, it must be critical race theory" (Anderson & Ladson-Billings, 2022, para. 3). And some believe that notion is by design.

Deliberate Conditioning. While research has found that discussing divisive topics can feel socially threatening, there is value in doing so, such as growing "social self-efficacy" (Simons & Green, 2016, p. 182). Fang and White (2022) found that discourse around "the historical and structural roots of racial inequality" can lessen "racial resentment" and increase "systemic and historical thinking about contemporary racial inequalities" (p. 1). Still, the mention of any social justice issue resounds as "divisiveness" to some policymakers and parents (Frey, 2022). This is deliberate conditioning stemming from

> political motivation by a party that is trying to ignore this nation's rising diversity and appeal to its largely white, culturally conservative voter base. In fact, the term

> "critical race theory"—a much narrower academic framework than what is commonly taught in K-12 courses on American racial history—is intentionally used as a scare tactic to appeal to that base. (Frey, 2022, para. 2)

To that, Christopher Rufo, the conservative political activist who informed Trump's U.S. Executive Order 13950, had a goal in mind (Jones, 2021). His March 2021 tweet highlighted his agenda:

> The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans. (Rufo, 2021, realchrisrufo)

Mission Accomplished. Within a year of Trump's executive order on "divisive concepts" and months after Rufo's tweet citing his mission to create a straw man of critical race theory, almost every state had introduced legislation regulating content and discourse around race, gender, and other identity topics in public schools (Bissell, 2023). That is a sociopolitical accomplishment for some, and a major concern for others. For Ladson-Billings, who transferred concepts of critical race theory from the legal realm into education in the 1990s, the concern rests with what she detected as a connection between the anti-CRT movement and a fear of the truth. She stated:

> We don't have to make up lies about the American story. It is a story of both triumph and defeat. It is a story of both valor and, some cases, shame. Slavery actually happened. We trafficked with human beings, and there's a consequence to that. But it doesn't mean we didn't get past it. It doesn't mean we didn't fight a war

over it and decide that's not who we want to be. (Anderson & Ladson-Billings, 2022, para. 43)

As some endorse an emphasis on slavery as a vital thread woven into America's tapestry, others see such focus as a ploy to revise "some previous, fundamentally correct narrative of America's founding" (Hattem, 2020, para. 1). Within the context of public schooling, anti-CRT legislation has specifically targeted content and classroom discourse, as CRT opposition sees curriculum as "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Teitelbaum, 2022; Inglis, 1985, p. 31). That is, for opponents of CRT, curriculum and conversations that "teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom" is an attempt to "rewrite American history" (Hattem, 2020, para 1). And in many states, there is now legislation or district policy in place to restrict such "storytelling." Table 2.1 captures the connection between President Trump's executive order and the anti-divisive concepts legislation impacting public education.

Table 2.1
Executive Order 13950 and Anti-Divisive Concepts Legislation

President Trump's US Executive Order 13950
"Divisive concepts" means the concepts that… 1) one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; 2) the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist; 3) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously; 4) an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex; 5) members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex; 6) an individual's moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex; 7) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex; 8) any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex; or 9) meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race." (Trump & US Executive Order 13950, 2020, para. 20)

Anti-Divisive Concepts Legislation
Divisive Concepts: Bans on teaching most of the "divisive concepts" listed in US Executive Order 13950 Identity and Diversity: Restrictions on highlighting race, ethnicity, gender, or other identities Social Advocacy: Limitations on "action civics" or current events discussions Transparency: Public listing of the content and materials teachers use Neutrality: Bans on teachers showing political bias in the classroom (Schwartz, 2022, para. 9)

Impact of Anti-Divisive Concepts Legislation On Public Schools

ELA/literacy teachers want to see reading, writing, and language growth among their students and facilitate that growth with choice materials and best practices to engage them in the process (Goering, 2021). To ensure students' to access the content and opportunity to make real-world connections to the learning, teachers are trained to use multicultural, relevant, responsive programming (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). This is curriculum and instruction that teachers have been trained to utilize in order to address the needs of their diverse student groups. However, anti-divisive concepts legislation and policies indict much of the culturally relevant education framework (Morgan, 2022). Consequently, there is a decrease in material and approaches that teachers feel are available to utilize for the improvement of learning outcomes, especially the outcomes of chronically underserved students. Alas, the need for more (not less) diversity-centered content is especially dire for our region's underperforming students.

Cut from the Curricular Charcuterie Board: Content, Conversations, and Courses

With nearly every state proposing or passing legislation banning or limiting topics such as race, discrimination, unflattering history, and gender and sexual identity, the challenge lies in understanding what is legal and allowed in the public-school classroom (Gross, 2022). What is clear to many is that the bans and constraints span a range of

sociopolitical, sociocultural, and sociohistorical issues, with Race in America, America's racist legacy, and gender/sexuality identity most commonly restricted.

Content

Across all content areas, the function of instructional texts is major, and within English language arts—paramount. For elementary school students, instructional texts are manipulated to offer students "word recognition" and "decoding" opportunities (Hruby et al., 2019, p. 11). For older students, instructional approaches to text engagement target close reading, literary analysis, and reader response experiences (Hruby et al., 2019). Sell (2005) posited that, at a time when multiculturalism is no longer an ideal but rather the way it is, literature and carefully chosen instructional texts facilitate an awareness of and appreciation for diversity through "contrasting perspectives, concepts and worldviews" (p. 90). It is the mirrors-windows-and-sliding-glass-doors concept that Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) advanced. Essentially, rich text has the capacity to facilitate reflective, transparent, and exploratory literary experiences for students. However, that premise is not always considered when instructional texts are selected. Sonia Nieto, scholar and professor of language, literacy, and culture, spoke about her text selection journey as a young teacher:

> I tried my first tentative steps at adapting curriculum so that it would be more interesting and meaningful to their lives and realities than the highly scripted curriculum I was given on the first day of class. I recalled how as a child, I had rarely heard any reference to my culture, background, or experiences in school and I began to understand how a more relevant curriculum might have helped me feel that I belonged. (Ferlazzo, 2021, para. 10)

Even for non-students of color, reading texts that are selected from a range of diverse authors, about diverse characters, and from diverse perspectives is instructionally sound. Sims (1990) asserted that multicultural literature expanded all students' awareness of similarities and differences among cultures, traditions, and values.

Books. Books representing people of color and LGBTQ+ issues have been disproportionately challenged in the culture war over CRT and DEI (Pendharkar, 2022). The American Library Association (ALA) reported that, in 2021 and 2022, it recorded the highest number of book challenges in its history of data collection of challenged and banned material which began in the 1980s (Hines, 2022). President of the ALA stated about the uptick in text removal requests:

> The unprecedented number of challenges we're seeing already this year reflects coordinated, national efforts to silence marginalized or historically underrepresented voices and deprive all of us—young people, in particular—of the chance to explore a world beyond the confines of personal experience. (Hines, 2022, para. 4)

Despite the benefits of a teacher's autonomy to choose books, short stories, poems, and current events to share instructionally, restrictions are the "new normal." Morgan (2022) listed some of the instructional content that has been proposed to be or already banned from public school classrooms.

- In Pennsylvania, a proposed bill stipulates that students cannot be forced to read content that could expand understanding of affirmative action, or unwarranted favorable treatment.

- In Oklahoma, a new law passed that prohibits teachers from teaching content that would elicit anguish within the context of their race or gender.
- In most proposed or passed legislation, there are restrictions on content "involving racial inequalities and social justice movements."
- Content that is used in "programs implemented to better serve students of color." (Morgan, 2022, p. 37)

These limitations, which are only a few of many, remove such texts as Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), *Ruby Bridges Goes to School* (Bridges, 2009), *Warriors Don't Cry* (Pattillo Beals, 1994), Holocaust-related literature like *Night* (Wiesel, 1960) or *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006), *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1983), and works by authors such as Amy Tan, Gary Soto, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Sherman Alexie, Malala Yousafzai, and Mildred Taylor (Robinson, 2022). Further, according to 2021 data provided by the American Library Association, LGBTQ+ texts and texts by or about black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) were challenged double the rate of texts banned for sexual content (PEN America, 2023).

Conversations

Like the restrictions on content and texts that anti-CRT legislation targets, classroom discourse is also under scrutiny. In Alabama, for example, "restrictions on classroom discussions about race" and other concepts considered "divisive" is the law of the land (Robinson, 2022, para. 15). Yet, the Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning (2017) explained that class discussion in its various formats, i.e., whole group, pair-shares, Socratic Seminar, "write-discuss-write," derives its benefits from the Vygotskian (1962) notion of social learning through knowledge sharing. Further,

tough-truth topics like America's racist history, war, the Great Depression, the horrors of the Holocaust, and current events like police-on-citizen violence and immigration reform are not remote concepts to students. Many students understand something about various historical, cultural, and social justice issues (Jackson, 2018). Moreover, well-chosen text and class discussion have been used for years to unpack and add to what is known about such topics; this is evidence-based practice (Burke, 2012). From their mixed methods study, Wolf et al. (2005) offered an encouraging connection between "discourse-based instructional approaches" (i.e., discussion, accountable talk, debate) and literacy skills (p. 20). They found "evidence that a classroom discourse including listening to others, questioning other's knowledge, and exploring one's own thoughts has a positive relationship with the academic rigor of reading comprehension" (p. 20).

When Students Talk. A poignant example of the impact of anti-critical race theory legislation is a January 2023 Planet Money segment (Beras et al., 2023) on National Public Radio (NPR) featuring a 3rd grade class in Ohio learning about economic principles through storybooks. The segment captured students' text-to-world connections and higher-order thinking through literacy and math concepts. Audio of their engagement revealed robust, energetic interaction with the NPR reporter, their teacher, their peers, and the texts. The series of read-alouds seemed to progress as instructionally planned until students detected, in addition to economic concepts, issues of difference and discrimination in the last story. The book was Dr. Suess's *The Sneetches* (1961). Several moments into their teacher's read-aloud, students began to react, in much the same way as before during the first two picture books. The teacher read:

> Now, the star-belly Sneetches had bellies with stars. The plain-belly Sneetches had none upon thars…The star-bellied Sneetches live the good life, and the nonstarred Sneetches do not. The star-bellied Sneetches don't let the plain-bellied Sneetches come to their frankfurter roast, picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts. (Beras et al., 2023, minute 21; Seuss, 1961)

These were some of the students' literary responses: "Oh, that's kind of mean," "They got to fight back," "…like, just 'cause their bellies are plain and they don't have stars in it doesn't mean that they're not special," and "Like, white people disrespected Black people, but then, they might stand up in the book" (Beras et al., 2023, 21:00). In essence, students were using grade-level literacy skills [drawing inferences, making predictions, determining key ideas and details, and generating text-dependent questions] to engage in social justice discourse. However, the communications specialist for the school district who had been sitting in on the production felt that the text-based interchange of ideas was not appropriate. The communications staff member explained:

> I don't know if I feel comfortable with [this] book being one of the ones featured. I just feel like this isn't teaching anything about economics, and this is a little bit more about differences with race and everything like that. So do you mind…if we pause this book … Yeah, I just don't think it might be appropriate for the third-grade class and for them to have a discussion around it. Are you OK with that? (Beras et al., 2023, 22:00)

One thing is clear from the audio: students discussing difference, discrimination, and taking a stance alarmed at least one adult in the room. It is also evident that students were confused about what was happening with the halt of the story and that they wanted to

know how the story ends. Further, the scene in this elementary classroom—a showdown between conflicting professional judgement about which texts and concepts belong in the public-school learning environment—represents an issue larger than the Dr. Suess wars (Watts & Asmelash, 2021). And while some of the works and legacy of Dr. Suess include fodder for debate (as with many authors, media, and content), the enduring issue is America's discomfort with its own narrative.

Courses

In addition to restrictions on content and activities, whole courses are now under the watchful eye of opponents who see a political slant in the programming of particular classes (Kim, 2023). Florida's governor, backing his state department of education, rejected an Advanced Placement (AP) course titled *AP African American Studies* (Kim, 2023). Calling the course an indoctrination effort fueled by a "political agenda," DeSantis had this to say about the College Board-developed course that would provide high school students an opportunity to earn college-level credit: "When you try to use black history to shoehorn in queer theory, you are clearly trying to use that for political purposes" (Pendharkar, 2023, para. 23). For many, the explanation published by the Florida State Department of Education is the most concerning aspect of the ban. The department stated in a press release that "The content of this course is inexplicably contrary to Florida law, and significantly lacks educational value" (Pendharkar, 2023, para. 3). And Florida is not the only state restricting whole courses. In Indiana, anti-CRT legislation has threatened Advanced Placement designation for multiple courses. Specifically, the warning emerged from the passing of laws by multiple states that restrict texts, content, and engagement

surrounding issues that are commonly found in upper-grade level and/or college course work.

> The College Board's Advanced Placement Program said that it will remove the AP designation from courses when required topics are banned, a move that would jeopardize the ability of high school students to earn college credit for success in those courses. (Herron, 2022, para. 3)

In addition to Indiana, content could be stripped from AP courses in a number of states, including Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, which have passed anti-critical race theory laws and ban the teaching of certain content, particularly in English and history (Stump, 2022).

Student Access. Years before, Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) explained the problematic connection between advanced, college credit-earning courses and students of color. Essentially, college admissions look at high school grade point averages, standardized test scores, and participation in advanced coursework such as that offered by College Board to make acceptance decisions. Because many districts across the country serve populations that are predominantly students of color, minority representation in AP courses is misaligned (Solorzano and Ornelas, 2004). For example, College Board reported that, of the over one million U.S. public high school seniors taking AP exams in 2022, 34.5% were taken by "traditionally underrepresented students—including Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students" (College Board, 2023, para 1). Courses such as an African American studies class stand to increase interest among students of color in rigorous, relevant coursework and offer an opportunity to earn college credit at no cost. Conversely, current anti-critical race theory

legislation could serve to decrease advanced course offerings, further reducing access and opportunity for historically marginalized student groups.

Implications For The Setting Of This Study

In the state in which this study was conducted, there seems to be a split on the issue of CRT. An April 2022 poll of over 1000 voters suggested that most believe that curriculum and instruction decisions should be made by educators rather than politicians (Duncan, 2022). Nevertheless, an anti-CRT bill is one Democrat's vote away from veto-proof passage (Schoenbaum, 2023). The governor vetoed a similar proposal in 2021, determining that the bill would lead to government overreach and educator confusion (Schoenbaum, 2023). If passed, the law would mirror anti-CRT legislation enacted in other states.

Pushed Out by the Anti-CRT Push. As mentioned before, the participants in this study do not teach in an area bound by anti-CRT legislation. Proposals. Yes. Enactment. No. Still, the impact of the national anti-CRT movement has been felt by the educators in this region. One retired educator from the area explains what led to the end of her English teaching career. She described the push to exit the profession in this way:

> For over 21 years, I taught high school English to students…students of color, trans students, evangelical Christian students, students guided across the border by coyotes and who spoke no English yet, and students whose families could trace their history through Mayflower ancestors. Until 2021, we read Toni Morrison, Malcolm X, Elie Wiesel and Chinua Achebe, alongside Shakespeare, Dickens and Hemingway. That same year, I found myself targeted along with other teachers in my county by extremists backed by our local conservative school board members.

> During school board meetings, my fellow educators and I were bombarded with accusations of "CRT," and "indoctrination," despite our efforts to create appropriate lessons for our students to learn about our past and present that will prepare them for the real world. (Biondi, 2023, paras. 1-3)

Even without enacted CRT legislation, the region of the United States in which this study was conducted is like others that have. Its teachers and administrators are professionally navigating the tension between efforts to hold space for diversity in their classrooms and a political agenda that encases diversity, equity, and inclusion as "divisiveness" and "indoctrination."

Related Literature

Selecting texts and choosing instructional approaches are essential responsibilities of an English/ELA teacher. As of late, many teachers in this country are teaching in an atmosphere that restricts their autonomy and diminishes their agency to provide the most appropriate programming for their students. Anti-CRT policies overwhelmingly affect K-12 education, with nearly three-fourths of the measures seeking "to control teaching and curriculum in the classroom" (Lambert, 2023, para. 2). "These bills have tied the hands of educators and administrators dedicated to teaching critical pedagogies and have continued the suppression of knowledge and truth for K-12 students" (Grice, 2022, p. 26). Further, the culture war over critical race theory has called into question teachers' competence and integrity to manage curriculum and instruction around identity topics and social justice issues (Ferlazzo, 2022). Rather than being credited for ensuring educational equity for their diverse student groups, many teachers find themselves in fear of accusations of indoctrination or worse. Nevertheless, data show that there are

thousands of teachers who are highly qualified to meet the challenges of the modern classroom.

Permission to Teach

"Good teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 2021) is not an automatic manifestation. Delivering effective instruction using choice materials requires a range of competencies. Those who facilitate positive outcomes for students amid the many challenges associated with public education surpass the "competent" marker into "high quality" distinction. Teacher quality is "the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement" (Rice, 2003, p. v). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2022) listed the essential traits of professional educators: 1) facilitate student learning 2) know their subject matter and how to relate it to students 3) monitor student learning 4) reflect on practice and 5) participate in learning communities. Fortunately for American schools, in addition to being served by standards-driven educators, "55 percent of elementary school teachers and 61 percent of secondary school teachers held a postbaccalaureate degree in 2017–18" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It appears that, through adherence to robust professional standards, continual training, and advanced coursework, U.S. teachers have earned more than permission to teach. Most know the rules and have the tools to deliver a first-rate education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Qualifications

Though many educators seek master's, specialist's, and terminal degrees, like other professionals, educators must earn a bachelor's degree. Extensive training and internship in the form of student teaching are often required in many programs of study,

and the cost of earning an English degree averages $10,000/year at four-year public universities (Bouchrika, 2023). Teacher licensing is contingent upon successful performance on multiple standardized exams, as most states require a proficiency exam in the content area of licensure, as well as an assessment on the principles of learning (Educational Testing Services, 2023). In sum, the educator licensing pathway provides American public schools with access to a pool of several hundred thousand English teachers each year. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) found that, of the 1.7 million people with degrees in English, nearly 430,000 are employed as teachers.

As this study explored the perspectives of English teachers specifically, professional standards for educators in language arts warranted a review. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2022) articulated the knowledge and skillset that English/ELA teachers who are prepared by accredited programs bring to the classroom. Those proficiencies are described in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2
English/English language arts Teacher Competencies

Domain	Proficiency
Inclusive, Standards-aligned, Instruction	Apply and demonstrate knowledge of learners and learning to foster inclusive learning environments that support coherent, relevant, standards-aligned, differentiated, and antiracist/antibias instruction
Antiracist, Antibias Language arts	Apply and demonstrate knowledge and theoretical perspectives, including antiracist/antibias ELA, pertaining to texts, composition, language, and languaging
Inclusive, Theory-aligned, Research-based Planning	Apply and demonstrate knowledge of theories, research, and ELA to plan coherent, relevant, standards-aligned, differentiated, antiracist/antibias instruction and assessment

Inclusive, Motivating Engagement	Implement planned coherent, relevant, standards- aligned, differentiated, and antiracist/antibias ELA instruction and assessment to motivate and engage all learners
Reflective, Collaborative Professionalism	Reflect on their ELA practice, use knowledge and theoretical perspectives to collaborate with educational community members, and demonstrate readiness for leadership, professional learning, and advocacy

This wealth of know-how belongs to professional educators who are equipped to make critical judgements about what works best for their students. Explained another way: Knowledge of English language arts subject matter, educational theory, child growth and development, and instructional methods is an amalgam of expertise that many would acknowledge as capable of making curricular and instructional decisions (Deane et al., 2015).

Autonomy and Agency

"For a critical reform of schooling to exist, teachers must have more voice and more respect in the culture of education." (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 240)

At the center of this research study is teacher autonomy and teacher agency and the way the two are situated within the current anti-critical race theory movement. The notion of curricular restrictions and "banned" content elicits feelings of professional undermining (Liou & Cutler, 2023. Conceptualizing ideas on teacher autonomy and teacher agency help inform this study by explaining the dynamics of teacher decision making.

Teacher Autonomy. Professional autonomy in teaching involves the interplay between teachers' actions and regulatory provision and constraint (Pantić et al., 2021). Teacher autonomy is thought to be the in-the-field, boots-on-the-ground permission to

use professional judgement to make decisions in the classroom. McPhie and Kenney (1959) explained that teacher autonomy is accommodated by the following:

- Education and training to perform instructional tasks
- Employment to perform instructional tasks based on qualifications and capabilities
- Acceptance of expectations to meet instructional objectives.

Through that lens, in-service teachers who comply with the expectations of their building and district administrators and meet professional standards should be trusted with the "localized responsibility" to make choices that garner student learning (McPhie & Kenney, 1959, p. 286). However, long before anti-CRT legislation and policy, other agendas have sought to remove that responsibility from teachers.

Neoliberalism. For three decades after the second World War, teachers enjoyed the trust and respect of their communities—and the autonomy that spring from them (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). As sociopolitical pressure insisted upon greater standardization and "evidence-based practice" in public education "within a neo-liberal framework," teachers' decision-making scope narrowed (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010, p. 2). Neoliberalism centers around efficiency and conservation and opposes the inefficiency and waste of "big state," small oversight (Apple, 1999). In sum, neoliberalism represents a "broad ideology that became popular in political, economic, and governmental circles" during the 1970s and peaked globally by the 1980s, with its shift away from big government and blackhole spending (Heinz, 2017, para. 2). For the public school system, neoliberalism framed "students as human capital," who needed to be educated and trained as the future labor market and economic contributors (Apple,

1999, p. 9). In essence, there was no economic latitude for the irrational spending on public services that did not advance America's economic market (Apple, 1999).

Socio-politically, the American public's watchful eye over public school teachers is appropriate, as public schooling should reflect the "citizenry it serves" (McPhie & Kenney, 1959, p. 289). However, autonomy-squelching overreach is problematic. McPhie and Kenney (1959) asserted about teacher autonomy:

> Every competent educator expects and encourages the public to co-operate in defining the outcomes or results expected from the educational institutions it has established and supports. But no intelligent layman undertakes to direct the trained educator in performing a task calling for specialized competence. (p. 289)

Hyslop-Margison & Sears (2010) offered insight on the overreach and undermining of teachers. They asserted that hindering educator autonomy diminishes teachers' inclination to accept responsibility for the outcomes of their students (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). Teachers are with their students for most of the calendar year and make numerous decisions each day for them. It is the destabilization of decision making for actual students they know and serve that demotivates teachers (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). About the definitive connection between professional autonomy and actualization, Knight (2019) explained it this way: Teacher motivation is scant when teacher autonomy is scant.

Teacher Agency. Differing from teacher autonomy, teacher agency is the action teachers take based on their lived experiences and "perceptions" of their latitude to navigate and respond professionally to the needs of the work (Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020, p. 119). Teacher agency manifests in the following ways: 1) making

decisions 2) taking initiative and 3) holding firm "in ways that affect their work" (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019, p. 2). Though many hope that teachers are permitted and empowered to make instructional decisions that are appropriate for their students, multiple factors influence agency. Pajares (2003) summarized the work of Albert Bandura—work which provides a helpful framework for understanding how teachers adjust and transform their professional practice. Social cognitive theory (SCT) anchors the concept of personal and professional agency.

Social Cognitive Theory. Initially referred to as the social learning theory during the 1960s—that people learn by watching other people—Bandura's work had evolved by 1977. Pajares (2007) examined the 1970s/1980s work of Bandura, concluding that social cognitive theory holds at its core the notion of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) posited that self-efficacy beliefs are beliefs people have about their ability to carry out intended actions and that those beliefs play a major role in agency. For the social cognitive theorist, the premise is that "people are agentic operators in their life course" (Bandura, 1999, p. 22). Social cognitive theory "reflects a view of human agency in which individuals are proactively engaged" in thoughts, beliefs, and values of their own choosing (Schunk & Usher, 2012, p. 14). Czerniak and Chiarelott (1990) expounded upon the idea of agency and self-efficacy beliefs as conscious "judgements" about what we believe we can do, influencing performance, persistence, and completion (p. 50). In effect, unless a person believes his or her actions can elicit intended outcomes, there is little incentive to exact effort in the face of struggle or failure (Bandura, 1989). Teacher self-efficacy works in much the same way. Citing the research of Gibson and Dembo (1984) as well as their own study of educator self-efficacy, Czerniak and Chiarelott

(1990) explained agency as the "belief that one's abilities can bring about positive changes in students' behaviors and achievement" (p. 50). What is suggested here is that teachers who have faith in their efforts to progressively impact students are motivated to act. On the other hand, teachers who believe that there are factors beyond their control and outside of their capacity to change give up (Czerniak & Chiarelott, 1990; Dembo & Gibson, 1985). In short, teacher agency is achieved through successful navigation of internal and external challenges to belief in self and capability.

Permission

As a culturally relevant, responsive, inclusive approach is theorized to be what works in diverse classrooms (Sleeter, 2004), it is a teacher's education and training and autonomy and agency that make it happen. Sleeter (2011) posited that diversity advocacy in the classroom, such as employing culturally relevant strategies, "is not only about teaching, but is also a political endeavor directed toward equity and justice" (p. 19). For some, that is an inappropriate endeavor for the classroom. In a diversity-discouraged sociopolitical climate, it is especially important to survey teachers' navigation of curricular limitations. These limitations "have created confusion, uncertainty, and fear, and teachers may face a range of consequences, from professional discipline to monetary penalties, if they are found to be in violation" (Brunold-Conesa, 2022, para. 12). While Pollock et al. (2022a) succinctly asserted, "Educators need to know their agency" and feel empowered to make choices that positively impact their students (p. 107), even a highly qualified teacher's autonomy and agency may prove no match for that degree of backlash.

Summary

This study served to explore English teachers' perspective on and experiences with anti-CRT policies. Specifically, the study sought to highlight what teachers are doing to offer diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction in spite of the confusion and limitations imposed on them. A review of the literature indicates that, across the country, current curricular and instructional decisions are impacted by policy born out of an ongoing culture war over what and how students should learn about America's history and social justice issues. Though teachers are educated and trained to use professional judgement to meet the needs of their students, a political agenda is undermining their pedagogical autonomy and reducing their professional agency.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the action research designed to address the problem of practice. English teachers are the literacy leaders on campus and challenged to ensure college-and-career literacy readiness among their students. As widely reported during the last couple of years, autonomy to make instructional decisions has been compromised for educators across the country. The long-standing imperative to facilitate diversity-centered, culturally relevant learning environments and programming has been disrupted by political calls for CRT-free classrooms. The problem of practice this study attempted to address is the existing tension between the mission of teachers to provide diverse, equitable, and inclusive curriculum and instruction and the agenda of politicians to disrupt DEI efforts. In light of book bans, curriculum critiques, and discussion dodging, the English teacher's navigation of a new instructional era warranted investigation.

Research Question

I sought those in the field—English, ELA, and/or literacy teachers—to unveil the way in which they interpret their decision-making capacity in the wake of a major political movement. To uncover those perspectives, the following question steered the research:

- How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the action research topic and problem of practice. Discussion of the chosen research design follows. The setting of the study and my role within that setting is addressed next, followed by the participant sampling plan. Description of the participants is presented next. Thereafter, I explain the data collection tools, methods, and process of data analysis. I then outline the design's validity and discuss ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

With its distinct focus on improvement through disciplined, systematic, practical inquiry, my problem of practice is best addressed with action research (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Action research in education is theoretically advanced by "the importance John Dewey gave to human experience … in the generation of knowledge" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 21). To that, the teachers I have served have consistently communicated to me that they want to learn better, more effective ways of reaching students. In my effort to offer "better, more effective" practices for teachers in their pursuit of pedagogical improvement, this research centered on exploring the perspectives of English teachers in "a quest for knowledge about how to improve" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 2). This research uses the agency of lived experience and interpretation to infuse insight into a broader conversation on teacher autonomy, social justice issues in the classroom, and culturally relevant education. The following approach was employed to conduct the action research study: qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenology.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research centers on "understanding how people interpret their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). It is a paradigm within action research in education that builds "knowledge" and elicits "insight" that serve as agents of change (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 46). Ospina (2004) further highlighted an important potential of a qualitative approach to action research: the emergence of "a novel perspective of a phenomenon … not well understood because of the narrow perspectives used before" (p. 9). In pursuit of a "novel perspective" on balancing instructional decision-making and politically driven policy, I maneuvered through this action research accommodated by a qualitative design.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology was offered to the world of psychology by Edmund Husserl, as a method of "investigation of human experience" (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). Within qualitative methodology, phenomenology seeks "the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). As such, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for probing the social, emotional, and professional navigation of English teachers in an ongoing equity-erasing political movement. Succinctly, the phenomenon in this study is English/ELA teachers' course content and instructional considerations. The essence under examination is the human experience or lived experience within the phenomenon in light of the anti-CRT movement. Moreover, my problem of practice required that which phenomenology surfaces: insight that "dwells with and openly respects persons' own points of view and honors the multiperspectivity found" within a phenomenon (Wertz, 2005, p. 175). It is the honoring of multiple perspectives on ensuring educational equity amid a diversity-

discouraged political environment that suitably mates phenomenology with the theoretical structure of this study.

Hermeneutics. Creswell (2007) advised the phenomenological researcher to "decide how and in what way his or her personal understandings will be introduced into the study" (p. 62). To that end, I chose to incorporate hermeneutics, or an "interpretative approach" into this study (George, 2020, para. 1). Based on the work of Martin Heidegger, an early to mid-20th century philosopher trained under Husserl, hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded by the notion that interpretation is essential to understanding (Laverty, 2003). Smith and Osborn (2007) highlighted the way interpretation works within hermeneutic phenomenology:

> While one is attempting to capture and do justice to the meanings of the respondents to learn about their mental and social world, those meanings are not transparently available; they must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation. (p. 66)

Efron and Ravid (2020) referenced the sharp contrast between the interpretive nature of qualitative data and the objectivity of data-from-numbers. They stated that traditional research often seeks context that is "generalized" and more "universal" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 13). Guillen (2019) concluded that hermeneutic phenomenology garners "the description and interpretation of the fundamental structures of the lived experience" as well as "recognition of the meaning" (p. 222), which is aptly what I desired in order to extract the fullest understanding from my participants.

Setting and Context

This study took place within a large public school district in the southeast region of the United States. The district, which I referred to as Glenndale-Clark School District (pseudonym), is made up of over 100 schools, across the rural, urban, and suburban areas of its community. Student enrollment across K-12 grade levels during the 2021-22 school year was nearly 70,000. The student poverty rate is over 60%, and the graduation rate is near 90%. A majority of the students are members of racially, ethnically, and/or culturally minoritized populations, with 41% of the student enrollment Black, 17% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and nearly 1% American Indian or Pacific Islander. White students make up a little over 28% of the student population. The K-12 teaching staff is over 60% white, with Black teachers representing 32% of the staff and 7% of teachers identifying as "other."

Role of the Researcher

I have developed professional learning experiences for teachers in the region, at both the middle school and high school level, since the 2015-16 school year. As support staff for teacher development, I have modeled, mentored, coached, guided, and assisted teachers in all areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management. I have had no "official" administrative or evaluative responsibilities over the teachers in this district, but I have observed the classroom environments and practices of many. In terms of positionality, some teachers have expressed to me feelings of being "evaluated" or "judged." However, I am not currently in a role that "observes," "evaluates," or "judges" their level of skill and wherewithal, which diminishes any power dynamic that might otherwise elicit discomfort.

The Researcher's Perspective. My own experiences influenced my determination to embark upon this action research study. I strongly hold the belief that there is a dominant culture and a subordinate culture in America. I believe that racial hierarchy is the reason why. I also believe that, while America has much to be proud of, it must not shy away from its sociohistorical and sociocultural realties. Among those realities are supremacy and oppression that have wreaked havoc on generations of people. I believe that the legacy of oppression continues to be felt socially, politically, economically, and educationally. As an English teacher of color, I have experienced parents requesting "the other teacher" because their child was a serious student who required "advanced instruction." I had an "advanced degree" and facilitated some of the highest student assessment scores in the district year after year. Yet, there were families who switched out of my class into the English class taught by a White teacher after meeting me at Back-to-School night. Bias, microaggression, and racial slights are difficult to prove. Moreover, there are situations that have little to do with bigotry. Still, as a Black person, I have felt rejected upon sight, and that lived experience is part of my belief system about my country. To that, my worldview drives my professional agenda to improve teaching practices in order to help students from marginalized backgrounds get the quality education they historically have not received—not in my area, not in my state, not in my country. I explored the tension between the pedagogy of English teachers and the agenda of certain politicians because I believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have been rejected upon sight. The anti-CRT movement has relegated equity work to "liberal agenda," "indoctrination," and "blame and shame" in the public-school classroom. And I believe that critical race theory explains the reason why.

Participants

To obtain volunteer participants for this research study, I employed purposeful sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested "purposive," "non-probability" sampling for qualitative studies (p. 96). For this study, the sample had to reflect current teachers who 1) teach at the elementary level; teach at the middle school level; and teach at the high school level 2) serve diverse student populations 3) have participated in equity-centered professional learning on culturally relevant education and 4) have phenomenon-based experience(s) that can be captured, explored, and shared. Moser and Korstjens (2017) pointed out that a criterion-based component to sampling in phenomenological study is appropriate, as participants must meet a specific criterion: "experience with the phenomenon under study" (p. 11). Within this study, that phenomenon was navigating curricular and instructional choices and providing culturally relevant learning experiences before and since the anti-CRT movement. Further, seeking an in-depth examination, my plan reflected a manageable sample size capable of securing data collection based on Merriam and Tisdell's recommendation of "reaching a point of saturation or redundancy" (2016, p. 101). The steps taken to select participants for this study represent a "maximum variant" method to purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 3). That is, within my sample, I sought a range of perspectives on this issue. In addition to attempting to represent English teachers from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, my goal was to choose participants from varying age groups, gender identities, educational backgrounds, and experience levels.

To initiate the invitation process, Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved communication strategies (U.S. Postal Service and e-mail) were implemented. I invited

six English/ELA teachers within the region with whom I was familiar from prior teacher support roles I filled in previous years. Each received an invitation (Appendix A) to participate in the study via U.S. Postal Service. To gain additional potential participants, I used my university-provided student email to send invitations to the email addresses listed on schools' websites of English teachers in the area. I contacted nearly 100 English, ELA, or Reading teachers, with the goal of securing six English/ELA teachers—two at each level: elementary, middle, and high school—to participate in the study. Participants #1 and #3 were recruited via mailed invitations within two weeks upon receipt. Participant #2 volunteered to participate from the email recruitment strategy within a day.

Each participant serves the Glenndale-Clark School District. I chose their pseudonyms for privacy and anonymity. Participant #1, referred to as Sally, is a substitute English teacher for the 2022-23 school. Participant #2, referred to as Cora, teaches several English courses at one of the large, diverse high schools within the district. Similarly, Participant #3, referred to as Mary, teaches 12th grade English at one of the district's high schools. The following is an introduction to each of the three participants.

Sally

Sally identifies as a bi-racial, African American and White, female who uses she/they/her pronouns and is situated in the 22-30 age range. She earned degrees in English and Political Science in 2019 from "the public Ivy." She began her professional journey as a writing tutor for a community college during the 2019-20 academic year. Sally taught 6th and 7th grade ELA at an area charter school during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. She is currently pursuing a graduate degree in school psychology and

works as a substitute English teacher. When asked what contributed to her willingness to participate in this study, she responded:

> I want to help bring more multiculturalism and diversity into classrooms so children can read texts that have a real-life relevance and impact. One of my professional aims is to diversify and rethink the "Canon" of literature that is taught in K-12 and higher education.

Sally has a definitive view on ways public education needs to change in order to better serve students. She believes that shortened school weeks (from a 5-day week to a 4-day week for students) would give teachers more time to thoroughly plan quality learning experiences, develop professionally, and collaborate with colleagues. Additionally, she believes that shortened school days would give students more time to practice skills at home in the comfort and support of family. Finally, Sally believes that 100% reading proficiency is a "must attain" social goal, as well as a moral imperative.

Cora

Cora is an African American woman in the 31-40 age range. She is Ivy League-educated and began teaching at the collegiate level 15 years ago. Cora's professional journey has brought her to the junior and senior English classrooms in an urban high school. She teaches courses along the curricular spectrum, from special education programming to Advanced Placement courses. Her college minor in African American Studies, in which her classes "were taught by leaders in African American studies and Black Feminist thought," informs her professional worldview. Additionally, her positionality comprises experiencing advanced coursework throughout her own K-12 school years as the only Black girl in those classes. For Cora, when asked what enticed

her to participate in this study, she stated: “I know how important text selection can be to engagement. Cultural relevance can make the difference between a student’s success in the class versus checking out completely.” Cora envisions holistic change as the transformation necessary for improving learning outcomes for all students. She stated that, socio-politically, change should resemble the following:

> Fully funding public education so that students and teachers could have the resources they need would be the gateway to a truly wonderful world! Ensuring all students had access to health care, mental health care, food and shelter, and universal basic income would create the conditions in which everyone could thrive.

Mary

Mary identifies as “Caucasian” in the 41-50 age range. She has over 18 years of experience teaching English. Mary admits that she did not know what she wanted to do professionally upon graduating college. She wanted to “motivate and inspire young people” and began teaching with that mission in mind. Mary confides that, though she entered the profession lateral entry (gaining licensure while in service), she “landed correctly and fell into a career that is my passion and purpose in life.” As a seasoned teacher, Mary saw the importance of this study. Believing that public education needs further development, she was willing to participate in the research because she thinks change begins with dialogue, such as the discussion this study hopes to spur. Further, she posits that “teachers are best equipped” to inform systemic change. Mary feels that transforming education would involve serving all students and meeting them where they are. Additionally, she envisions public education that focuses less on assessment and

more on critical thinking. Finally, Mary hopes for an educational system that values ownership: schools of their campuses, teachers of their classrooms, and students of their learning. Moreover, Mary believes that "ownership" centers on "choice." She stated: "Recently, I have enjoyed independent text units. My goal is to have students connect with literature. I have found that allowing students to have choice in what they read is a way to allow that to occur."

Data Collection Tools

I collected data on the phenomenon of English teachers making text selections and instructional decisions for their diverse student populations during the current culture war over critical race theory, utilizing the semi-structured interview as the main data source. As the study includes participants from various subgroups within the sampling, interviews should reflect experiences "diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories" (Laverty, 2002, p. 29; Polkinghorne; van Manen, 1997). A semi-structured interview protocol allowed for both pre-planned and extemporaneous questioning that permitted the latitude to draw out from participants stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also collected data from an open-ended response survey, document analysis, and an autoethnographic narrative. An additional data source was a document analysis of the researcher's reflexive journal. van Manen (1997) explained that data collection in hermeneutic phenomenology aspires to convert the lived experience into a "textual expression of its essence" (p. 56).

Interviews

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interview elicits "reflective recollections" (Sloan & Bowe, 2013, p. 26). Interviewing participants once during the data collection

process of the study, I employed an "open-ended," "less structured" approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). Participants were guided by an open-ended instruction to "Please describe your experiences with text selection, planning, and content choices during the recent anti-critical race theory movement." The interview questions are listed in the interview protocol (Appendix C). The interview protocol included follow-up questions and time for summative wrap-up to address any elements missing from the spontaneous and semi-structured responses. Boyd (2001) explained that studies employing a phenomenological approach reach the point of saturation after interviewing between two and ten participants. For this study, I continued the interview process with each of the three participants until I reached saturation and no new insight was being revealed (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Surveys

Efron and Ravid (2020) described the use of surveys as a quick, laborsaving way to collect information about beliefs, opinions, values, and behaviors (p. 112). In hermeneutic phenomenology, surveys may be used to "establish clear baseline information which can be used" for later analysis and comparison (Sinister, 2017, p. 3). Due to the interpretive nature of this study, it was important that I establish a rapport with participants, since I do not work with them. Without attempting to closely acquaint myself to the participants, the open-ended response survey served to provide preliminary insight into their writing style, voice, and a basic personal and professional profile. The survey also provided participants an opportunity to pose questions prior to the interviews. The survey questions are listed in Appendix B.

Autoethnographic Narrative and Reflexive Journal

I am a licensed English/ELA educator, thereby, professionally align to the sampling group with poignant experiences with the phenomenon being examined. Bochner (2012) explained about the autoethnographic narrative: It is inquiry that focuses "on the functions of stories and storytelling in creating and managing identity" and "the expressive forms for making sense of lived experience and communicating it to others" (p. 155). My perspective through narrative—a probe into my experience building diversity-considered text sets and navigating controversial topics in the educational setting—added to the exploration within this study. This narrative is included in a reflexive journal that I utilized throughout the study.

Cope (2014) explained that "Reflexivity is the awareness that the researcher's values, background, and previous experience with the phenomenon can affect the research process" (p. 88). Owning reflexivity, I understood the importance of monitoring and addressing my sensibility throughout the study and leveraged the use of a reflexive journal. Reflexive journaling is a strategy that makes notations of thoughts and feelings elicited during the study, as well as an approach to bracketing—identify and isolate—perception and bias (Mantzoukas, 2005). Smith (2007) summarized the use of reflexive journals in hermeneutic-phenomenological study, emphasizing the researcher as the principal method of data collection. As an integral part of the study, Smith (2007) stated that the researcher's reflexive journal contains "reflections on the research process" that contribute a "contextual richness" (p. 360).

Document Analysis

Bowen (2009) described document analysis as a "systematic" process for examining a document for data collection (p. 27). The study collected data from reading lists approved by Glenndale-Clark School District to be used instructionally. Saldana and Omasta (2016) asserted that data can be collected from mute sources by "analyzing value systems suggested by documents" (p. 69). Because this research centered on text selection and teacher decision making, examining what was "officially" vetted and approved by the instructional administrators offered the interpretation of the findings "union and support through the use of different data sources" (Armstrong, 2021, p. 1).

Data Collection

To explore the problem of practice and answer the research question, I first mapped out the information needed to address the topic. Because I desired first-person points of view from English teachers who currently teach amid the anti-CRT climate, the design for this research study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Unlike quantitative research methods which use objective data to address research questions, qualitative approaches deliver an understanding of subjective data such as lived experiences that cannot be identified through numerical data (Moustakas, 1994). Succinctly, "If the research objective is problem solving or exploring the phenomenon under study, then it would recommend interpretivism" (Khan, 2014, p. 300; Creswell, 2007). I sought to see the world as the participants see it, through analysis, theme emergence, and interpretation from survey data and semi-structured interviewing (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants accessed the survey through a hyperlink within their invitation to join the study. The survey was generated using Google Forms and asked for demographic identifiers, as well as other introductory information, such as participants' favorite text(s) to teach and preferred instructional strategy. Participants were also given an opportunity to ask questions before the interview. The survey took participants between 12-38 minutes to complete. Each of the three participants asked questions of the researcher.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom virtual meeting platform over three weeks. For Participants #1 and #2, interviews lasted over an hour; for Participant #3, the interview exchange spanned several days. The virtual interviews began with a reminder to participants that the session was being recorded for transcription and review purposes. The researcher's introduction was followed by a brief discussion of the purpose of the study. Within three minutes into the interview, participants were asked to introduce themselves as English educators. From there, the rest of the semi-structured interview continued, prompted by a preset list of questions (Appendix C). Participant #3 responded to the same questions through Google Forms. Follow-up questions were asked through email, and all three participants responded. One of the follow-up questions asked of the participants was the web address to the school district-approved reading lists. Data was collected from an in-depth document review of those approved reading lists—noting and sorting authors, topics, themes, and reading levels.

Data collection began with the researcher recording several types of information, before the research design was completely fleshed out, during data collection, and throughout the analysis process. One source of researcher-based data was an autoethnographic narrative of my English teaching experience. In addition to the

narrative, I journaled reflexively. Running journal prompts included *When I Taught English…Where Am I on This…I Heard This Today…I Need to Rethink…*and, *Today, This Research Seems*, which allowed me to remain focused on the process, my feelings about the process, and external factors that impacted how I perceived the study (Turner, 2021). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that researcher reflexivity includes "past experiences" and the ways those past experiences "shape interpretations" (p. 184). During data collection from the participants, I wrote in the researcher's reflexive journal before and after each interaction. The reflexive journal contained 76 entries at the completion of interviews and follow-up questioning.

Data Analysis

A "process of data analysis" that streamlines the road to findings is recommended for qualitative research (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Data analysis for this research study included multiple phases. In essence, data analysis began after "empirical" activities, or the "collection of experiences," and entailed a "reflective" cycle, or analytical search for meaning, toward interpretation (Fuster, 2019, p. 225). Data analysis occurred after each collection activity, through notetaking, annotation, and rereads. Once data from the survey, interviews, document analysis, and nearly 75 entries had been made in the researcher's reflective journal, the "formal" analysis process began. The phases consisted of data immersion, coding, categorization, and theme extraction. This process allowed for what Creswell and Creswell (2018) insisted was the aim of qualitative analysis: "a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue" (p. 182).

Data Immersion

I began with multiple viewings, review, and notetaking of the interview recordings and written dialog. Data from the interview audio recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word's speech-to-text tool. A line-by-line review for accuracy within the transcriptions corrected mistakes made by the misinterpretation of the voice recording tool. The corrected transcriptions and data collected through Participant #3's written expression were then organized into dialogue format, with the pseudonym of each participant and researcher used. Researcher comments were removed from the transcription documents, leaving only the interview questions asked and the participants' responses. Data collected from the document analysis were generated into a table within Microsoft Excel and color coded. The review of the researcher's autoethnographic narrative involved the use of manual color-coding using highlighters. Engagement with the researcher's reflexive journal entries was ongoing throughout the study and included review, notetaking, and annotation.

Reduction. Mertler cautioned that one of the major challenges of data analysis of a phenomenological study is the reduction of volumes of data in a manner that retains their accuracy and integrity. Phenomenological analysis of data is a "ferreting out of the essence or basic structure a phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). Moreover, data analysis would hardly be possible without the "reduction of potentially massive amounts of narrative data" using a system of organization and categorization (Mertler, 2020, p. 174). The "coding scheme" involved 1) transforming the data from the interviews, surveys, narrative and reflexive journal 2) sorting and organizing the transformations into units of meaning by theoretical framework theme recurrence and 3)

drawing conclusions from the themes and synthesizing the findings (Mertler, 2020, pp. 174-176).

Data Coding

Utilizing the theoretical framework, an a priori approach to labeling the data was appropriate for lending structure to the first iteration of coding (Goldsmith, 2021). Looking to Ladson-Billings's (2021) notion of culturally relevant teaching and the impact of teaching in an anti-CRT atmosphere, I systematically assigned codes to the data based on the framework represented in Figure 3.1.

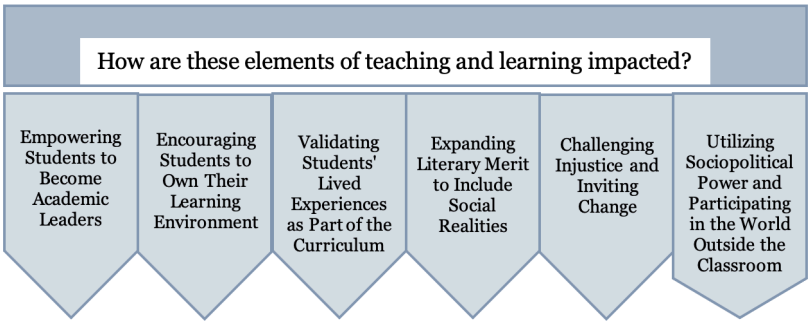


Figure 3.1
Coding Framework

From the coding framework, I imported codes: academic empowerment, learning environment, student validation, literary expansion, challenge and change, and power in participation, into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (Lumivero, 2023). NVivo grouped the data within the coding feature, based on manual sorting of the responses and other data. Related responses and data were given the same code, and some data were assigned more than one code. The codes were organized and charted according to the frequency of reference.

Data Categorization

To get closer to eliciting themes from the data, I began category construction to detect patterns in the coded data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Categorization was facilitated by sifting the coded data through the goals of culturally relevant pedagogy—student achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through the sifting, I continually asked myself, "what is at play here," and "how are these chunked data speaking to student achievement, cultural competence, or critical consciousness."

Theme Extraction

Several patterns surfaced from the categorization process that pushed my analysis toward a more pointed goal, essentially back to the research question: How are these teachers making curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive in the middle of this culture war over critical race theory movement? I revisited the data multiple times, to answer questions that kept popping into my mind…*Is it even possible to offer a culturally relevant education in a diversity-discouraged climat*e…*Are they afraid of pushback*. I was attempting to capture the essence from their lived experiences and perspectives. It was the collectivized representation I was seeking. From the coding process and examination of units, categories, and patterns that surfaced, the following themes emerged relating to teachers' experiences with text selection: critical cognizance, growth and development, intentionality, circumnavigation, and commitment.

Bracketing. I utilized the reflexive journal as a way to "bracket" my experiences throughout data collection from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 113). Because my own lived experience includes being situated within the phenomenon of the study, I

carried beliefs, bias, and assumptions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that "the extent to which any person can bracket his or her biases and assumptions" is unclear (p. 27). Bracketing is, however, a strategy I employed to contain the presumptions I held in an effort to effectively analyze and drill down to the essence of the experiences offered by my participants.

Research Design Validity

Wertz (2005) posited that the highest quality of data for the phenomenological researcher is "concreteness" (p. 171). Moreover, qualitative data derived from accurate details that align with lived experience rather than opinions and speculations that sufficiently replicate the phenomenon when the researcher cannot observe the phenomenon itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With that, a major concern arises from the researcher serving as the primary tool of collection within qualitative research (Teherani et al., 2015). My interpretation of the interpretations of my study's participants was an obvious challenge to validity. The validity of qualitative data is a matter of fidelity, precision, and authenticity (Mertler, 2020). However, phenomenology accepts the inherent subjectivity within data collection and the effort to make meaning of the lived experiences lifted from participants (Sloan & Bowe, 2013; Patton, 2005). Nonetheless, trustworthiness was sought in this study by adhering to using five standards:

1) descriptive validity: facts-based accuracy of participants' input
2) interpretive validity: representation-based accuracy of participants' input
3) theoretical validity: theory-purpose-findings alignment
4) evaluative validity: objectivity-based researcher meaning-making
5) generalizability: implications-based applicability. (Mertler, 2020; Gay et al.,

2009; Maxwell, 1992)

Measuring up to these standards insisted upon well-articulated processes and description, ensuring rigor in the "methodological" and "interpretative" processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 239).

Triangulation

I used several methods to capture as closely as possible the essence of the phenomenon and the reality of the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To collect data, I used an open-response survey, a semi-structured interview, and document analysis. By collecting data from multiple sources, there was added confidence that the findings were "supported by integrating inferences and demonstrating that independent measures of it" are in alignment (Mertler, 2020, p. 142).

Thick Description and Member Checking

In hermeneutic phenomenology, thick description lends to a study "presentation of the participants' perspectives in their own words" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 76). Such a data representation puts "the experience to the reader so that it can be relived" (Nielsen, 2000, p. 11). Thick description was heavily relied upon in this study. Ensuring that participants' input and insight are presented accurately, Efron and Ravid (2020) recommended "member checking" (p. 77). I employed this strategy by providing study participants with interview transcripts and asking for feedback regarding accuracy or possible misinterpretation.

Reflexive Journal

I am a former English teacher and educator of color, with a child of color who attends public school. There was an intimacy involved that added a subjective element to

this study. Efron and Ravid (2020) advised that, even in qualitative action research, "There needs to be a balance between objectivity and subjectivity" (p. 63). There must be "reflexivity," or an awareness of the impact a researcher's belief system, value set, and life experiences has on the study (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 63). I maintained a reflexive journal to monitor and document the effect of my subjectivity on the study throughout the process. In spite of the impact subjectivity may have had on this study, the plan for transferability rested in my effort to make "modest extrapolations" from the findings, offering a small contribution to scholarly understanding of the tension between local efforts to ensure educational equity and a state and national political agenda to eliminate DEI initiatives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 254).

Ethical Considerations

Action research involves ethical consideration of those who agree to participate in questioning, reflection, disclosure, and more. The minimum standard is that researchers "think through possible risks to those participating in the research process and try to minimize these as much as possible" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 157). Before beginning this study, I carefully considered possible risks to participants. As a distinct political movement has infiltrated the American classroom with the strength of legislation and policy to affect an agenda, educators' personal and professional standing are potentially at risk depending on their stance on CRT. Efron and Ravid (2020) insisted upon the following safeguards as a mean to protect study participants:

- Permission and Consent
- Confidentiality and Safety
- Respect of Research Site

- Accuracy in Interpretation and Presentation.

Prior to agreeing to participate in the research, potentials were provided details of the study, expectations of participants, measures to ensure confidentiality and data protection, and a platform for asking questions. After participants were recruited, each was reminded that withdrawal is possible at any time. I ensured participants' confidentiality and anonymity by replacing their names with pseudonyms on all interview transcripts. All data has been digitally housed in Microsoft Office and NVivo software. The transcriptions have remained in a password-protected virtual vault. After data analysis and coding of the transcripts, the copies were shredded. I will destroy all digital data after five years. I have no authoritative, evaluative, or daily connection to my participants. Further, all research activity was conducted outside of professional contract hours, off school district property, and through personal rather than professional communication tools. This minimized risk to job safety and security. I did not use students nor student data in this study. As previously mentioned, member checking protocol was employed to ensure accurate interpretation of the data and presentation of the findings.

Summary

This study sought to answer the qualitative question: How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement? It employed a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach to collect and analyze data for the purpose of interpretation and deep understanding of the lived experience situated within the phenomenon (Efron & Ravid, 2020). That is, I sought to highlight and understand how current teachers experience making diverse, equitable,

inclusive curricular and instructional choices “under a social and political microscope.” I believe that the design of and methods used within this study garnered transformative insight and drove a much-needed revisit to the ideal of “free and equal educational opportunity for all.”

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the study. The purpose of the research was to spotlight the experiences of ELA teachers navigating the process of making professional decisions on content and activities that adhere to legislation and policy, while remaining committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I attempted to discern common themes among participants as they described their level of autonomy and agency within their public-school setting. As diversity is a reality of public-school classrooms, the "permission to teach" allows educators to address the range of difference among the students they serve (Pozas et al., 2021). The problem is that schools across the country must adjust to a political climate that deemphasizes and actively undermines diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. This study explored the conflict between educational equity efforts in the classroom and curricular regulations set by the government. The objective was to gain deeper understanding of teachers' experiences in hopes of informing future teacher support efforts.

Data Analysis and Theme Emergence

Exploration of the problem of practice involved collecting English teachers' perspectives, stories, and experiences through survey and interview data. An initial deductive analysis sought to organize the data by impact to each of the dimensions of Ladson-Billings's (2021) culturally relevant English teacher. This is a teacher who

- empowers students to be academic leaders,
- encourages students to own their learning environment,

- validates students' backgrounds as part of the curriculum,
- expands what is considered "literary,"
- challenges and changes social injustice, and
- participates in the sociopolitical world outside the classroom.

The analytical lens was then expanded. Using the theoretical framework, the data were filtered through the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy and two tenets of critical race theory:

- Culturally relevant pedagogy (1) focuses on student learning and academic success (2) develops students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities (3) supports students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
- Two critical race theory tenets propose that (1) racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture (2) systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy. (Crenshaw, 1988)

The Findings

As previously mentioned, there is growing misalignment between teachers ensuring equitable learning opportunities and politicians promoting divisiveness-free classrooms. Given the need for literacy growth, the underperformance of students of color, and a number of barriers to effective educational experiences identified in the literature, it was beneficial to draw meaning from the perspectives and experiences of English educators currently teaching in diverse public schools. The question this study sought to answer was "How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?" Data indicate that

making curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive in an anti-DEI political environment involves the following five themes:

- Critical cognizance of the forces at play
- Continuous personal and professional development in both sociopolitical matters and teaching and learning
- Intentional efforts to offer student-centered literary experiences
- Strategic circumnavigation around obstacles to educational equity
- Unwavering commitment to put students' needs first.

The following sections expound on the themes that emerged from analyses of the data. Each of the five thematic sections concludes with interpretations made using the theoretical framework to address the research question. Those interpretations are represented in Tables 4.1-4.5.

Critical Cognizance

English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-CRT movement by leveraging critical cognizance.

Ladson-Billings (2021) explained that teachers must "consciously create" the conditions that a diverse population of students needs to thrive (p. 32). A culturally relevant learning environment does not happen by accident. A consciousness of the "moving parts" necessary for student success is required, along with a critical awareness of factors that deter positive learning outcomes. Hester (2018) pointed out that "White-dominated curriculum ignores decades of research showing that students learn best when they feel connected to the content of their learning, and when their own identities are reflected" (para. 9). Still, anti-CRT proponents seem unwavering in their support of anti-diversity classrooms. Each of the three participants had strong ideas why. The

participants did not use the words “critical cognizance” to describe their awareness of the forces working against equity-centered teaching and learning. Rather, they shared their perceptions of the anti-CRT movement. The critical cognizance theme developed from multiple allusions to recognizing the rhetoric, reflecting on what is at play, and refocusing their efforts within the context of anti-diversity.

DEI vs. Political Agenda

Cora had distinct feelings about the political rhetoric working so hard to decenter diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom. She expressed that she is not impressed by the credentials of those who are pushing policies that negatively impact curriculum and instruction. She asserted:

> The anti-Critical Race Theory movement is led by ignorant people discussing books and articles they have never read. They are trying to hide the fact that they hate people who don’t look like them while also pretending they are the victims of an oppressive system when they are in fact the beneficiaries of that system.

Last summer, Mary participated in equity-centered professional development which deepened her understanding of anti-racist pedagogy. More cognizant of the systems that hamper equitable learning experiences, Mary suggested, “Let's be honest, it is not the theory that is making people react.” She expanded on that idea, stating “I see the negative reaction to critical race theory as a lack of understanding or as fear from individuals.” She explained that the “real” fear behind sociopolitical-driven restrictions on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom is the potential for “deep, thoughtful conversations that enable students to think and understand …how the history of this country has many implications- some good- some awful.”

Diversity or Divisiveness

Sally went on at length about the resistance to CRT and the push for eliminating "divisive concepts" as functions of fear—a fear she understood upon reflection on her first couple of years in the classroom. Sally elaborated, explaining the challenge of steering students through complex concepts:

> If you are a teacher, you know it's important to talk about, but you don't have the tools to do it correctly…you're afraid of saying something wrong, making a mistake… I think that is probably what leads to some of the policies being put in place, because if you were to look at it from the view of people who want to ban or limit the discussion of critical race theory, one of the thought processes I've always heard is 'well I don't want my child going to school and being made to feel bad because of something that they weren't part of', and I think it comes from that fear of people not handling it correctly.

Sally, who teaches younger students, empathized with the fear of distressing and dividing learners. She confessed that, "No, you don't want an environment that feels divisive…that draws a line, Oh this is minority culture; this is majority culture. This is the history of violence that's occurred in the past." Sally said she learned that a teacher cannot leave the conversation there. It must continue. Sally guides her students through the initial divide. She said that the learning experience has to "integrate where we're going to go forward…how we're going to move forward…how we treat each other with respect. If you just leave it divisive, I think that's what people are afraid of." During the virtual learning days during the pandemic, Sally said that police brutality and social uprising were keen on the minds of her students of color. "What can we learn from this…" or

"How do we begin to move in the right direction…" questions helped her steer student thinking past divisiveness. In all, Sally said that she wished there were a "democratic" process that systemically collaborates, from top down, to ensure consensus in the way students are encouraged to engage with complex issues.

> If everybody in this process…if the people who wrote the curriculum, the school administration that purchases the curriculum, the instructional leaders that help the teachers as they are delivering this instruction… [works together] then we are overlapping in how we cover these topics and how we discuss these topics. So from the top down, we have some level of agreement.

Rhetoric vs. "Real" Concerns

From shifting away from the use of high-stakes assessments to increasing critical thinking in the classroom, Mary believes that "Public education needs to shift and needs to develop." For Cora, there should be more focus on the culture of reading, generally, and students' reading habits, specifically. She underscored what needs to supplant the nationwide focus on CRT:

> O.K., everybody's saying they want these test scores to go up, but people aren't reading. […] people are so up in arms about 'what you're making my child read', but like the number of students that actually graduate from high school without reading a book is much higher than the number of students who are reading…so um there's that element of this whole book challenge/CRT thing…um, we have, like, a reading problem…yeah, that is greater than…they're worried about what they're reading…I'm like, are the students reading.

In this study, critical cognizance refers to the acute social, political, and professional awareness that each of the participants maintains to effectively navigate obstacles to educational equity. From the data, there was a collective frequency in participants' reference to "knowing," "recognizing," "thinking," and "seeing." The findings show that employing critical cognizance disconnects these teachers from ignorant bliss and binds them to discernment. Interpretations of Theme 1: critical cognizance were revealed through the theoretical lens of this study and are represented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1
Ladson-Billings's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995, 2021) and Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory (1988) Lens on Critical Cognizance

English teachers must
focus on student learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
employing critical cognizance allows the participants to recognize what is happening outside the classroom and why. So, they are not distracted from "one of their primary responsibilities" inside the classroom: "helping students become academically successful" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 26).
English teachers must
develop students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities, (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
utilizing critical cognizance maintains the participants' awareness of what is missing from the monocultural curriculum offered to multicultural students and why. So, they consciously consider ways to foster students' "cultural competence" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 27).
English teachers must
support students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because

racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
drawing upon critical cognizance empowers the participants to facilitate students' deeper exploration into the world around them and ask why. So, their "pedagogy and the students' learning" function as "a form of cultural critique" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 29).

Growth and Development

English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-CRT movement informed by continuous personal growth and professional development.

There is evidence that teacher preparation programs fail to adequately equip preservice teachers to meet the needs of America's diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Further, many come to realize that public school "curriculum, both that assigned officially by the administration and that unofficially created by social norms and expectations [is] not culturally relevant to their students and the communities in which they lived" (Weilbacher, 2012, p. 1; Kohl, 1967). Ladson-Billings (2021) asserted that serving diverse learners requires a "comprehensive approach" including a range of personal and professional learning (p. 111). Theme 2 emerged from participants' description of the actions they take to grow and develop to better meet the needs of their students.

Informing Practice; Justifying Choices

Cora shared, "During the last 10 years, I did a lot of reading around reading …Penny Kittle and other resources on student literacy." Penny Kittle (2023) taught English and coached literacy instruction for 34 years; her advocacy is grounded in the notion that teachers "live a belief in [student] success." Mary, too, engaged in self-study to address her recent professional challenges. She shared specific texts that informed her

wherewithal to adjust to an anti-CRT climate. Mary explained, “I did a great deal of reading. Clint Smith's *How the Word is Passed* [2022]. *White Fragility* [DiAngelo, 2018]. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* [Hammond, 2014].” Mary admitted that she was particularly enriched by the conference she attended out-of-state last summer. She beamed, “I also attended a training […] in early August. And it was basically teachers teaching other teachers how to be antiracist. It was amazing. I loved the conversation. I loved the resources. I loved the shared lesson plans.” From her anti-racist PD, Mary understands the implications of the anti-CRT movement more fully. She holds hope that the movement will cause no further marginalization. She said about the importance of teachers preventing exclusion and disengagement within their classroom learning spaces:

> It is the role of the teacher to make sure that this does not happen. We might insist on culturally responsive teaching, text where students can see themselves, texts that challenge ideologies that make us uncomfortable and be able to unpack that in safe spaces.

Learning From Non-Examples

Sally recalled multiple moments during college (for her, only a few years ago) when she spoke out during class discussion in her literature courses. She described situations in which microagressive, insensitive, insulting statements were made about characters she called “their token characters in their White lit.” Rather than engaging in what Sally considered a relevant consideration of the text, her professor nor her classmates were ever interested in unpacking the texts beyond mentions of “minor

character," "comic relief," or "sidebar stuff." To that, Sally stated, "If you're not even having these antiracist conversations in your [college] classes in 2015, 2016, and 2017, I'm not that surprised that we're having these [anti-CRT] conversations now [in 2023] for public school in K12 education." Sally admitted that she mourns the absence of social engagement through literature that she expected to have going into university studies. She learned to engage herself, divulging that she "advance" purchases "anything by" Ta-Nehisi Coates or the Obamas, among others.

Growing From Experience

Sally learned from the disappointing experiences with her college professors. She shared that "As the teacher, you have the responsibility of building those authentic connections so that there is an environment of learning that's respectful enough that we can talk about these things without being more divisive." How-Not-To experiences in the classroom grew her insight of the kind of environment she wanted for her students. Sally added that classroom discussion should be a vital part of engagement in the ELA classroom—teacher-to-students and student-to-student. She explained about class discussion at the upper elementary/middle school level:

> It might not have started with a conversation about diversity but especially when you have students that know they're not being represented who will start asking questions like 'Hey there's nobody like me in this story' [or] 'Where were the African Americans at this time' [or] 'What were they doing at this time' and you start getting into those conversations.

She insisted that she was "very organized" with her instructional activities but "never discouraged discussion from happening." She recalled a two-week period when one of

her Black students kept saying “White power” in her classroom and around their predominately Black campus. Sally explained that the student was a jokester and draw many laughs at the irony of his use of racially offensive slang. One day, she pulled the class into a whole group and discussed the history behind the phrase, the offense it causes, and its connection to violence. Sally never heard the student use the phrase again. She expressed her disappointment that the same had not been done in classrooms she has sat in as a student.

In this research study, personal growth and professional development represent the continuous learning repeatedly referenced in the data. Growth and development was a theme formed from the stories of participants’ independent book studies, self-funded conference attendance, and ongoing reflection. In varying contexts, each participant discussed ways she informed her professional practice, particularly in service to the chronically underserved. Collectively, the findings show that the participants are intrinsically motivated to expand their knowledge, improve their practice, and critically reflect on the teaching and learning experiences in their classrooms. Interpretations of Theme 2: growth and development were revealed through the theoretical lens of this study and are represented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Ladson-Billings’s Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995, 2021) and Crenshaw’s Critical Race Theory (1988) Lens on Growth and Development

English teachers must
focus on student learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,

growing and developing refreshes participants' competencies beyond being model citizens and delivering adopted curriculum based on the district pacing guide. So, they are steadily exposed to multiple perspectives and constantly updating their methods of helping students of color "successfully negotiate schools and classrooms" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 115).
English teachers must
develop students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities, (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
transferring that which is gleaned from growth and development increases participants' wherewithal to center students' culture in the learning. So, they help to build students' "cultural competence" to succeed academically while existing authentically (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 114).
English teachers must
support students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
modeling growth and development on a personal, social, emotional, political, and professional level exposes participants' students to the value of life-long learning. So, they build within their students an appreciation for probing and asking "questions about the ways that whole groups of people are systematically excluded" from the spoils of the American Dream (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 114).

Intentionality

English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-CRT movement driven by their intentionality to increase students' literary engagement and improve students' literacy proficiency.

One English teacher in California blogged about her 20th century days in the ELA classroom, explaining that "All students were expected to read the same books (written by old, dead White guys plus Harper Lee) and write the same five-paragraph essays their parents had suffered through 35 years prior" (Farley, 2022, para. 3). Sally, too, mentioned Harper Lee. She described professional development leaders guiding participants through

a text analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and the elements most often taught and discussed to 8th/9th grade students: internal and external conflict and full character development of the white characters. Then, participants are asked to think through *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the point of view of Tom Robinson. This was PD aimed at increasing teachers' intention to engage students in critical thinking.

DEI in ELA: More Than Analysis Of A Sub-Character of Color

Sally recounted her impression of the *To Kill a Mockingbird* -based PD. She thought, "Yes, I get it. This is White lit, passed off as a multicultural classic because there are Black people in the book." Sally frustratedly shared, "[We are all] still trying to decide, when it comes to English, what is it that's most important to teach students…And if they are all written by majority authors, still, and we know how diverse classrooms look…that cannot be a reflection and a matching perspective." Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) asserted that "literature does not simply reflect race and racism in American society; literature has played a role in constructing race and racism in American society" (p. 7). Along with the PD experience, Sally learned from a teaching moment that illuminates this point.

District-Adopted Curriculum: Monocultural Material

As a new teacher, she was assigned to work with a mentor teacher who observed her lessons, offered her feedback, and guided her through reflection. During one observation, Sally was teaching a lesson on advertisement and the impact of rhetoric. Sally explained:

> It was a series of 12 different ads that students were responding to, and at the end of the lesson, Ms. Xavier (pseudonym), was like, 'Did you notice that none of the

> advertisements had any people of color in them?' She was like, 'They're all from decades ago. They all had white couples featured in them.' She was like, 'There was no diversity presented in this lesson.' And she was like, 'You, the teacher, have to see something like this and bring in your own, you know…your own twist on it.' But I think that's how… the way it's set up. It's so ingrained. It's so implicit you don't even think about it […] the lesson that was given to me… whoever designed the lesson didn't think about the diversity… they just wrote it with the majority culture in mind.

From that point forward, Sally has been intentional about thinking through the curriculum she was delivering to students. She admitted that she was surprised and definitely not proud of thinking "with the majority culture in mind." She continued about the underrepresentation and oversight:

> It just won't occur to you. You will just present the lesson as it's given, and only after reflection or having someone point it out to you are you like, 'That is true. We didn't even think about it.' That's how ingrained into our brains it is… that we don't even see the lack of diversity in these materials. [You] have to go that extra step. You have to spend extra time to find the materials that connect to these things, because the person who wrote the curriculum didn't do that.

Equitable Literacy Instruction: On Purpose

Cora insisted that she is always "trying to be intentional about text selection." She said, as an upper-grade level English teacher, she knows that it is up to her to introduce (or reintroduce) students to the joy of connecting with a text before students graduate high school. She shared that her mission "is just to get people to have positive reading

experiences and see themselves as readers." Cora mimicked the warm, husky voices of her male junior English students her mentioning to her at the end of class, "Hey Ms. Cora, that's a really good poem" or "That was a very cool story." After a thoughtful pause, Cora conceded that "Not every piece will connect with every student." Sally pointed out that diversity is not monolithic and that "Each year the makeup of your classroom is always going to be a little bit different. So you have to have different things to bring in." Mary shared that she tries to enhance her ability to make appropriate, meaningful choices for her students. She stated:

> My favorite training was a self-study of Gholdy Mohammad's *Cultivating Genius*. I used this as framework for the guiding principle of why I teach and what my classroom environment needs to be. This is such an impactful book when looking for direction and justification for the choices you are making.

In a similar way that Mary utilized Gholdy Mohammad's (2020*) Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* to facilitate a more intentional text selection process, Cora acknowledged that she spent a great deal of time "trying to find as many different types of stories that might connect with my students after getting to know them through conversation." She shared that much of the time, her efforts pay off.

Text Selection: Knowing Our Students

Describing one especially significant nod to the importance of culturally relevant texts, Cora shared a profound experience that she insisted was at the heart of her efforts to select texts intentionally for the kids she knows and is trying to reach. One of her "standard level" English classes is one with attendance challenges. Cora traced her

attempts at getting those students involved and engaged, “but for whatever reason these students are not coming to school.” The struggle has been ongoing this school year, Cora admitted. Yet just the day before the interview, she witnessed the power of her instructional choices. She said,

> I had three students who were failing at the end of last quarter. One of them has an extremely low reading level… he's someone I was just having trouble [with] usually they came to class, but ‘can I get you to stay in class and be seated’. And so I got another student, who…played football. He's kind of like on level… but he hadn't been coming to class in like weeks. He showed up yesterday. And then a kid who comes all the time, just doesn't necessarily perform. So three black boys between 17 and 18 years old, sitting at a table together. And they're taking turns reading aloud Jason Reynolds’s A Long Way Down [Reynolds, 2017] They've been clamoring like, ‘I wanna read now. I wanna read now.’ Yeah. So that's like, the text we select really makes a difference.

In this study, intentionality refers to the on-purpose literary engagement that the participants foster in their classrooms. Repeated throughout the data, participants reference being intentional about making their classroom, the content, and discussions accessible to their students. The findings show that these teachers understand that accessibility to and engagement with the learning do not happen automatically; their focus on the texts they select, the approaches they use, and the classroom environment they create improve the odds that students will respond to instruction. Interpretations of Theme 3: intentionality were revealed through the theoretical lens of this study and are represented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3
Ladson-Billings's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995, 2021) and Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory (1988)Lens on Intentionality

English teachers must
focus on student learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
being intentional about interrupting literary whiteness enables participants to include more students in literacy engagement. So, they expand the "learning community" rather than teach "isolated and unrelated skills" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 70).
English teachers must
develop students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities, (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
making instructional choices that validate students' identities and backgrounds affirms their stores of knowledge. So, they grow the curriculum by incorporating reading, writing, and analysis around topics that students know and expand their thinking from that point (Ladson-Billings, 2021).
English teachers must
support students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
selecting student-centered material in a purposeful way to negate the effects of literary disinterest created by much of the packaged curriculum. So, they can move students toward "literacy for liberation," facilitated by welcoming "issues of political, economic, social, and cultural natures" into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2021, pp. 61, 71).

Circumnavigation

English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-CRT movement with strategic circumnavigation around obstacles to meeting their students' needs.

Because anti-CRT policy and its threat to diversity-centered educational programming were the stimuli for this study, the conflict was addressed early in the interview session. When asked during the interview, "How has the anti-critical race theory movement impacted your curricular choices," participants had varying experiences. Each participant has been directed to use only the texts listed on the approved reading lists issued by the district.

Autonomy To Choose From Pre-Approved Lists

Mary shared that she did not feel that the anti-CRT movement had impacted her text selection practices. However, at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, Mary said the media specialist reminded teachers about selecting instructional text, saying "Make sure your books are on the approved reading lists." Like Mary, Sally was under administrative directive to use material approved by administration. She stated about the curriculum that was purchased for the school:

> That is the curriculum that they bought for the school, and they suggested strongly that we maintain fidelity with this curriculum as much as possible…they really did not want us deviating from the curriculum…[saying] 'We do not expect you to have to pull in other things.' So they really expected us to follow it.

Each participant shared her perspective on text selection within the parameters of district policy, referring to the "approved lists" as a way to ensure pedagogical compliance. Upon review and analysis of the lists, their experiences took further shape.

The Question: "Culturally Relevant For Whom?"

Appendix D captures data on the racial and ethnic diversity represented on the approved reading lists, in terms of books by people of color (POC) about people of color.

There are 70 books approved for students at the 7th Grade level, with 22 representing authors and/or characters from racially or ethnically minoritized backgrounds. That equates to 30% of the approved list of books with characters, storylines, and themes reflective of perspectives outside the dominant culture. Sally pointed out that, for a student population in which 90% identified as learners of color, the approved book list felt culturally misaligned. On the 11th Grade list, only 20% of the approved books reflect racially- or ethnically- diverse texts. Cora signaled that Grade 12 is the level that has historically focused on British Literature. That might explain why there are no authors from diverse backgrounds included on the list of 75 books. There are, however, two texts written by White writers about people of color. The text suggestions for Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate English courses total over 300 books, of which nearly 25% are written by or represent racially- or ethnically- minoritized people.

Adding To the Approved: A Process

Document analysis of the reading lists of books from which participants must make their instructional selections spurred me to ask follow-up questions: "Am I missing something? Where's the diversity?" For Cora, she shared that, as a seasoned teacher, she is well aware of approved reading lists, curriculum, and pacing guidelines. Cora disclosed that strictly adhering to selection from a certain set of texts is now the expectation. She said, "There is this protocol [now]. When I first started teaching, no one really cared or mentioned it to me." Compared to those days, Cora believes she now has less autonomy. She explained that she can still teach what she wants to teach, but "the directive from administration [is] 'Whatever it is, make sure it's on the list.'" And because the approved

list available to her does not include some of the texts she wanted to teach, she described her option for adding the texts to the approved list as "a process."

> There's a procedure that you go through. Your school level MCAT [Media and Technology Advisory Committee] has to approve the book, and then it pushes it up through to the district level. And so yeah, there's paperwork you have to fill out about Lexile levels and a description of the text and what are the thematic ideas that are celebrated…For a while, it was just, like, I wasn't adding new books to the list just because I didn't have the time.

Making Use of the Approved

For the three participants, the "approved" curriculum and reading lists include texts that they teach, have taught, or would be interested in teaching. Sally was eager to offer her students a Maya Angelou piece. Cora taught one of Zora Neale Hurston's seminal works. One of Mary's favorite texts to teach is *The Kite Runner* (Hossein, 2003) in her AP class. All approved. But each participant shared that they look for ways to enhance the district-approved curriculum with content that will be more relevant to their students. Complementing the approved lists in no way suggests that the participants teach texts out of compliance of their building's or district's policies. Their shared perspective centered on student literacy and relevance.

Beyond the Approved: Holding Space For Student Interests and Literary Diversity

Education equity scholar Christopher Emdin (2017) asserted that teachers' commitment to cultivating a connection between content and their students lessens "misalignments between school and community" (p. 133). Tracing a phenomenon that happens within the learning experience when teachers intentionally infuse choice,

relevance, and cultural context into the curriculum, Emdin noted key takeaways: 1) students are fully engaged 2) curiosity is awakened and 3) connections are explored beyond the scope of a traditional lesson. Mary stated about cultivating literary engagement:

> I do supplement text, but more often, I do independent book studies and provide students with a wide range of texts. Students connecting with the reading is the most important thing because that is when students will actually do the reading and engage in thinking.

Like Mary, Cora builds in learning experiences that allow students to self-select books for extended study. Cora explained that "just getting them to own their lives as readers and cultivate their own reading lives is, like, a win for me." She described her approach to student-driven literacy experiences.

> We just finished our second independent reading unit, and students were choosing what they want to read as long as it's a novel or a play or a memoir. [I tell students] 'You've got carte blanche. I just want you to read this from start to finish… and it's fine if the first book that you picked up you're not into. Drop it; find one that you are passionate about, because, yeah, you're going to be writing about it and talking about it.'

Adding Diverse-Print Richness To Diversity-Poor Book Collections

Sally donated stacks of children's and adolescent literature to her classroom library. About providing supplemental texts, she said: "It's not even saying you have to teach it as a classroom novel…doesn't have to be a part of the curriculum…sometimes just having the book available so that whoever wants to can receive it." Similarly, Cora

mentioned spending hundreds of dollars from her personal funds each year buying books to increase students' access to rich, engaging texts. What Cora understands about loaning a student a good book: she knows she is not going to get it back. Still, she purchases new books often, and her message to her class is "Look what I got in," or "Yeah you can take this home," or "This book would be perfect for you."

For this study, circumnavigation describes working around the monocultural materials provided by the district. Though the participants teach different grade levels, each discussed at length the inadequacy of the approved reading lists adopted by the district to appeal to diverse groups. Analysis of the reading lists confirmed that only a small percentage of texts were by or about people of color. Circumnavigation emerged as a theme as Sally, Cora, and Marry explained that they supplement the required curriculum with more diverse selections. They also use independent novel studies as a way to empower students to connect with literature that is meaningful to them. As incorporating diverse texts into the curriculum is a state standard for literacy instruction, the data indicate that these participants view circumnavigating the options provided by the district as necessary supplementation. Interpretations of Theme 4: circumnavigation were revealed through the theoretical lens of this study and are represented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4
Ladson-Billings's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995, 2021) and Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory (1988) Lens on Circumnavigation

English teachers must
focus on student learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,

working around booklists and suggested texts that do not align with participants' diverse groups of students lessens the chance of literary exclusion and disengagement.
English teachers must
develop students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities, (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
making extra efforts to cultivate literacy rich situations and environments substantiates the importance of the reading, writing, analysis, and discussion and sets an example for students that reading is an effort worth making. So they empower students with the choice to connect with a book that resonates with who they are, what they choose to embrace, or what they hope to dismantle (Ladson-Billings, 2021).
English teachers must
support students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
enabling students to make novel self-study selections dismantles the constraints imposed by standardized educational programming. So, they take a "critical stance" toward the adopted curriculum and challenge the standard "concepts of knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, pp. 33-34).

Commitment

English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-CRT movement inspired by an unwavering commitment to meeting their students' needs.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that over 40% of public schools would begin the 2022-23 with vacancies, mostly created by teacher resignations (Zahn & Wilde, 2022). Whether or not teachers are leaving due to the political climate impacting educational policy, many would agree that teaching is a challenging profession, CRT controversy notwithstanding. In light of the recent series of professional stressors, including the pandemic, blending learning, increased school violence, and now

the anti-CRT movement, participants were asked to reflect on their overall perspective on teaching. What surfaced from their reflections was evidence of a commitment to overcome professional obstacles and setbacks for the sake of their students. Though data indicate that teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates, the participants in this study are not only determined to navigate the challenges of their job description; they are driven to do whatever they can to meet the educational needs of each of their students.

Educated, Trained, Prepared, and Inspired To Do A Tough Job

Mary stated, “I enjoy education.” She also believes that “Young people is why I continue to teach 18 years later.” Yet, Mary also expressed that she wanted “to see education develop to meet the needs of our students.” Her reflection centered on ill-focused agendas that do nothing to better serve kids. For Sally, she began her reflection by recognizing the platform that ELA classrooms serve to springboard countless directions of inquiry, interpretation, and discourse. Sally continued, “We're educated in this area. We've read different things. We know these kids, so we have an idea of what will really be impactful for them.” She admitted, “But it’s a tough job. There never seems to be enough hours in the day to get it all in. Time flies, except when students are squabbling or visiting the restroom. And we are still reacclimating students to basic socialization post-pandemic. It’s hard.” Cora said she understands why teachers are leaving. Because she is passionate about books, reading, and establishing life-long literacy habits in her students, barriers to and limitations on resources frustrate Cora. She explained about adolescent literacy: “They aren’t being given the space and time to read or access to books that they want to read. So [I’m] trying to turn that around, but that's not something that…[a] single teacher can do by themselves. We need…change at the

structural level." Despite a call for systemic change to fund print-rich environments and build a culture of reading, Cora described the efforts she makes to put resources into students' hands. She shared one example, explaining with warmth and emotion:

> I bought copies of the book *The Hate You Give* [Thomas, 2017] for my inclusion students…and gave them out in gift bags [to] make them feel special and wrapped the book up as a gift and put it in a blue bag with silver paper and then blue candies. Yeah, so I ended up having, like, to drop off the books to several students. But that's how, like, [I] met their families and tried to, like, convince them to log in to our remote learning days.

Educational Inequity: When Teachers Get It Wrong

During each of the interviews, the participants shared moments they believed their instructional choices and equity efforts had a profound impact on their students. Still, Sally freely acknowledged that sometimes teachers do not get it right. Needs go unmet. She shared two experiences of a "missed moment" to render equity and meet the needs of a group of students. First, she described an experience with a new student. Though the majority of Sally's students were African American, almost all identified as Christian. When a black Muslim student transferred in, Sally noted that the Muslim student and the other students "did not get along." She explained:

> Nothing in our curriculum covered anything even relatively close to his different religion, the different holidays that he celebrated. It was that entire culture difference to the rest of our students….and so to have something in there where they [could] get a little closer to him, [to] understand it a little better, I think it would have just helped, just with interactions day-to-day. They didn't understand

him very well, so they didn't get along very well. And you could just see when you have that lack of materials, you just don't have those conversations as a class.

In a second situation, Sally lamented the handling of a student who was transitioning genders. She said:

> We also had a student who was transitioning in 7th grade, went through a name change, pronoun change. And I think it was something that teachers handled as well as their capabilities kind of allowed them to. But there wasn't anything that was provided for us that was like 'Here's how you can navigate this as a grade level because you are going to continue to experience, you know, relationship things going on because of this.'

She admitted that a "genuine fear" she had about the anti-CRT movement is the "gag order" on diversity in the classroom. She anticipates that so many needs will not be met because conversations will not be entertained. Sally explained that heightened attention was paid to social-emotional learning during the last school year which many teachers hoped would quell the disrespectful behavior. She said, "We tried, and it still did not seem to do much."

> Because I think when you don't…when you don't talk about diversity, you don't build those empathy skills of 'Oh this is how this person feels' [or] 'This is what this person goes through' [or] 'This is this person's daily experiences.' You never have practice putting yourself in someone else's shoes and looking at it from their point of view. So you lack a basic respect.

Professional Trust and Respect: When The System Gets It Wrong

For Cora, she remembers things going wrong, even before the anti-CRT push. As the first Black AP teacher at one of her previous high schools, she recalls back-to-school

night, a hot, crowded classroom with over 120 parents cycling through to meet "the new teacher," she thought. Little did she know or consider, she was teaching under immense scrutiny. Cora asserted that she has always been a teacher with high expectations and rich, relevant coursework for her students. She explained that she knew many stories, had read many books, and had taught at the collegiate level. Cora remained up to date on the research around reading, such as what one educational justice advocate explained about culturally relevant texts in the classroom:

> Children's books have traditionally played a role in socialization -- teaching children how to think, how to act, and how to feel about themselves, others, and the world…We live in a time when there is a wealth of beautiful, thoughtful and nuanced children's books by and about people of color, and there is no reason for curriculum that doesn't represent the identities and experiences of all children. (Hester, 2018, para. 7)

Despite Cora's use of a wide range of high-quality, diverse texts and instructional methods to engage all students, she recalled being observed, analyzed, coached, and evaluated often, with the threat of an action plan if she didn't improve her practice. After some time, Cora "proved" herself the Ivy League- degreed educator she knew herself to be. Still, she explained that the anti-CRT movement feels like another layer of scrutiny that makes her job harder. She said with conviction, "Anti-blackness is always present. Yeah, it has to do with…not trusting Black teachers, not validating Black texts. And so, there's nothing new in this [anti-CRT]." The data do not suggest that Mary, who identifies as a White woman, shares Cora's experience with professional mistrust. Mary has continued to build higher-order thinking, interrogation, and critique into her lessons,

despite the political movement to avoid such potentially "divisive" classroom engagement. She explained about using theory to facilitate critical thinking:

> I believe I have tried to inform students more of theory in general, so I make a more intentional move to include multiple theory studies in class along with Critical Race Theory so that students understand theory in relation to literature.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Environment: Doing It Right

Data revealed that each participant believes that "navigating" anti-CRT is simple: Serve the needs of all your students and commit to doing it right. Sally said it best: "As the teacher, you are delivering this content to your students. You have to have enough autonomy so that you can make adjustments as needed." Mary stated that, CRT or no CRT, best practice in ELA is championing text engagement and deep discussion. For her senior-English classes, she explained:

> One of my favorite units to teach is on social justice, and to be truthful, in many years, all of my units have a component of social justice built in. This year we read *The Sun Does Shine: Finding Life and Happiness on Death Row* [2018] by Anthony Ray Hinton- a man wrongly convicted and just recently was set free. Reading a text such as this, opens doors to conversations around the controversy surrounding critical race theory.

Cora concluded her reflection on English teaching by explaining that her students need diverse, complex texts and discourse because they are diverse, complex kids. She proudly named some of what emerged from student engagement with the texts and discourse in the classroom learning community during this school year:

- “We were talking about relationships and ground rules and what love looks like and what women should demand of relationships… those kinds of conversations were really fruitful and students were really invested in them.”
- “We talked about history…where they're getting their news from…who shapes their worldview: their parents, their peers…where they feel comfortable…who they feel comfortable having important discussions with…and how do they use their voices.”
- “We talked about guns and violence…So then we're thinking about our community and what we owe each other…but then we also got to talk about crying and why people thought boys didn’t cry or why they wouldn't be entitled to the full range of human emotion.”

Cora stated that, even before the current movement to shield some students from classroom material and activities that make them uncomfortable, she taught literature that was thoughtfully chosen for her learners. And she contended that the same engagement-by-design choices will be made when anti-CRT becomes a bygone movement.

Based on the findings from this research study, educator commitment is captured in the way participants continue to do a difficult job, with multiple stressors, inadequate resources, and shrinking autonomy because of their dedication to serve public school students. Commitment emerged from the data as the three participants referenced their quest to use language arts not only to teach and assess literacy skills, but to engage and empower students with literary experiences that feed their intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development. Findings show that their motivation to effectively serve children withstands factors that impede their mission, including a culture war being

fought in their classrooms. Interpretations of Theme 5: commitment were revealed through the theoretical lens of this study and are represented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5
Ladson-Billings's Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995, 2021) and Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory (1988) Lens on Commitment

English teachers must
focus on student learning and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
remaining in the classroom is teaching and "no matter how good a fit develops between home and school culture" students need teachers to teach them (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 26). So a commitment to the professional is a commitment to teaching and so much more.
English teachers must
develop students' cultural competence to assist in their development of positive ethnic and social identities, (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
displaying a passion for and dedication to teaching and learning cultivates "strong interpersonal relationships" with students (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 85; Foster, 1992). So they connect with learners as having a background, culture, community, and "enormous intellectual capacity" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 85).
English teachers must
support students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) because
racism is systemically embedded in American society and culture and systemic racism perpetuates racial inequality despite claims of colorblindness and the agency of meritocracy (Crenshaw, 1998).
Therefore,
persevering through setbacks and the volatility of organizational change allows participants' pedagogy to "evolve to address the complexities of social inequalities" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 142). So they sustain an emphasis on the marginalized and ways to steer them toward a "place of normativity" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 141).

"But That's Just Good Teaching"

Through her own research experiences, Ladson-Billings (1995) asserted that, "The place to find out about classroom practices is the naturalistic setting of the classroom and from the lived experiences of teachers" (p. 163). Discovering the strategies of successful educators of students from diverse backgrounds, Ladson-Billings captured in culturally relevant teaching what she says many conclude is "just good teaching." Centered on teachers' facilitation of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, culturally relevant pedagogy is "good teaching, but it is much more than that" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). For Ladson-Billings, CRP is programming that addresses the needs of Black students and "other children who have not been well served by public schools" (p. 159). Further, culturally relevant pedagogy facilitated the analysis and interpretation of this study's findings. To understand the way the teachers in this study navigate instructional decision making in the wake of the anti-CRT movement is to understand the culturally relevant teacher.

A New Day: No Legal Space for Race

Participants voiced that a major barrier to culturally relevant English teaching has always been the practice of loading the "approved" curriculum with the "great literary works," known as the Canon. While Sally, Cora, and Mary asserted that there is a place for seminal works in the classroom, it is the oversight, or exclusion, of other deserving works that their instructional decision making has worked to address. Supplementing their curriculum with works by diverse authors about diverse people by pulling them from the literary margins is, as Cora voiced, "nothing new." The "new day" English teachers now face is the unclear set of professional and legal consequences of doing so.

Maintaining Space for Diversity

This study's findings identified multiple "mental moves" that these teachers make to offset the political effort to replace race and other "off limits" topics with content that will not upset, shame, or discomfort some students. From cognizance to intentionality and commitment, maintaining a space for diverse curriculum and instruction is an exercise of consciousness and awareness. Thought-to-Action for these teachers involves professional development, self-study, reflection, and circumvention of barriers to diverse, inclusive learning experiences—the "moves" of Ladson-Billings's culturally relevant English teacher.

Diverse, Equitable, Inclusive ELA Curriculum and Instruction

I interpret the findings of this study to mean DEI in the classroom has never been easy to procure. Maintaining [protecting] inclusivity of and an appreciation for difference, in the learning environment as a learning community, takes persistent effort. Based on reflection on my own practice and the insight lifted from participants, the centering of teaching and learning on diversity is a mindset. It is ensuring classroom spaces are enriched with a variety of print, media, critical discussion, and cultural representation. It is planning student-choice independent novel studies. It is delivering goodie bags of books to entice and engage reluctant readers. Sally, Cora, and Mary make pedagogical moves that insist on the "centrality" of cultural relevance in the English classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). For them, navigation of the tension between their instructional goals and the anti-CRT political agenda rests upon pedagogical decision making that leads to "just good teaching."

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this qualitative research study that sought to answer: How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement? Through multiple data collection methods and in-depth analyses of each of the three participants' lived experiences and perspectives on meeting the needs of their students, several themes surfaced. The themes worked to highlight the efforts teachers make to maintain space for diversity in the ELA classroom. In Chapter 5, I align the study's findings to the literature, present implications, and offer suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

This chapter begins with an overview and follows with a revisit to the problem of practice, purpose, theoretical framework, and research question for this study. A summary of the findings follows. The chapter continues with a discussion of the findings. Recommendations for ELA teaching and learning come next. The chapter includes a section of reflection on the methodology, limitations, and suggestions for future study. Chapter 5 ends with a summary of the study.

Overview

Public schools are more diverse than ever, with student entering U.S. classrooms from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. Students from minoritized groups now make up the majority of America's K-12 enrollment (Carrillo, 2022). Serving the educational needs of the diverse student groups in our classrooms has included a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (National Equity Project, 2023). Culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and instruction is considered a DEI approach to improving learning outcomes for non-White students (Howard, 2003). The harsh reality of chronic achievement gaps between White students and students of color makes DEI initiatives all the more critical to eradicating educational inequality. This research study was driven by the need to lift insight from those who are tasked each day to deliver diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction.

Problem of Practice

Since 2021, there has been growing tension between teachers' efforts to maintain diverse, equitable, inclusive teaching and learning in their classroom and a political agenda to disrupt DEI initiatives within all public entities. Across the country, political efforts have succeeded in dismantling the construct of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, the governor of Florida considers DEI encryption for "discrimination, exclusion and indoctrination" and signed into law legislation prohibiting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at public colleges and universities (Diaz, 2023). At the K-12 level, anti-divisive concepts legislation and policy indict DEI efforts, such as culturally relevant, responsive teaching, as critical race theory (Najarro, 2022a). With equitable educational programming being "confused with" CRT, there is a threat to frameworks put in place to more adequately serve students from minoritized and marginalized backgrounds. At a time when all students are bridging learning gaps created by disrupted learning during the pandemic, there is concern that fewer responsive approaches for historically underserved students will widen performance gaps. In short, a threat to or elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives is not good.

Purpose

One of the greatest resources we have is learning from the perspectives and experiences of others (Farrell, 2020). The purpose of this study rested on the notion that teachers' insight can shed light on the way distal policies impact local decisions. To that end, this study sought to highlight English teachers' experiences and perceptions of providing diverse, equitable, inclusive ELA curriculum and instruction in an era of anti-CRT. This is research that explored what three English teachers are doing to maintain

DEI in their classrooms amid the culture war over CRT and DEI. The action research model was appropriate for this inquiry, because the findings elicited from the study will inform my role and improve my practice as teacher support (Efron & Ravid, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1988) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) formed the theoretical framework for examining curricular choices and instructional decisions within the context of the anti-CRT/divisive concepts political movement. This framework holds within it a central focus on educational equity, both of efforts toward as well as barriers to. The major tenet of critical race theory maintains that racism in the United States is the norm in society (rather than the exception sprinkled among bigoted individuals here and there) and affects every system in America, including public schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Culturally relevant pedagogy is one path teachers can take to avoid leading students into pits of disengagement, disenfranchisement, and disconnection. Coupling CRT and CRP created a route for this research to probe political factors that impact teachers' use of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction. Using qualitative methods, the study was designed to extract data from these participants to answer the research question:

- How do English teachers make curriculum and instruction diverse, equitable, and inclusive amid the anti-critical race theory movement?

The Findings

The problem presented in this study is the navigation of political barriers to employing equitable education practices, such as utilizing diverse, inclusive curriculum and instruction. The use of survey data, interview transcripts, and document analysis

garnered a collection of data for this qualitative study. Data analysis and interpretation led to the findings which worked to address the problem of practice by answering the research question. As action research, it is important to state that the findings of the study cannot be generalized beyond the context, experiences, and perceptions of the English teachers who participated in this study. However, drawing deeper understanding from the implications is appropriate.

A Deeper Understanding

To fully appreciate the findings, two aspects of this research study warrant a closer look. First, it is important to revisit what was at stake by participating in this study. As discussed in previous chapters, the anti-critical race theory movement is one that has sustained momentum for nearly two years. As such, teachers nationwide have been working under the constraints of restricted curricula, regulated instruction, and actionable noncompliance. Instances of educators defending themselves and their practices against accusations of inducing divisiveness or promoting CRT are widely covered in the media. To that, an endorsement of or connection to critical race theory is currently considered a professional risk. For this study, I invited 90 educators from across multiple districts and charter schools in the region, and only three teachers were willing to participate. Each participant eagerly accepted the invitation to participant in this study, despite an awareness of the risks teachers take when they display the slightest hint of critical race theory alignment. Secondly, it is important to consider that, though the participants serve the same school district as English/ELA teachers, they do not know each other. They have never worked together nor collaborated professionally during district meetings, at conferences, or in the community. Yet, the data collected from these three teachers

suggest a closely connected professional alliance. That is, the participants' individual stories collectivized into a refrain of perspective and voice. The participants in this study prioritize cultural relevance in their instructional decision making; they are culturally relevant teachers. However, the findings indicate that what truly binds these educators is their belief in the agency of English language arts to advance social justice. As uncovered in Chapter 4, the findings of this research study highlight the extra effort it takes to facilitate equitable learning environments and experiences for the diversity in our public school classrooms. This is effort willingly and eagerly made by teachers who believe that guiding students—especially the minoritized and marginalized—to see themselves as thinkers, readers, writers, speakers, leaders, and problem solvers is social justice advocacy. To that, participants' social justice advocacy-driven "extra effort" encapsulates themes that emerged from data analyses, which include critical cognizance, personal and professional growth and development, intentionality, circumnavigation, and commitment.

Discussion

Of note, a significant implication of the results of this study is that the culture war over critical race theory and "divisive concepts" is about more than protecting students from a theory or division. As a "culture war," the anti-CRT movement has realized the introduction of nearly 700 executive orders, legislative, and district policy measures to ban critical race theory in K-12 education since September 2020 (UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Program, 2023). Within the region of this study, state departments, school boards, and teachers have made national news for initiating or resisting book bans (Weaver, 2023), adopting new content standards to ensure CRT-less teaching and

learning (Modan, 2023), and enacting legislation that can withhold funding to schools found to violate anti-CRT laws (Kruesi, 2021).

Considering the seemingly obvious ways race has impacted people differently throughout the history of America, the following three questions floated just below the surface of this study: *Which of the tenets suggests an objectionable premise? Why the heavy-handed resistance to a concept that is theoretical, perspective-based, and used to situate race and racism in post-secondary studies many levels beyond K-12 curriculum? How should teachers respond to calls for "neutral," colorblind, non-divisive curriculum and instruction?*

The *Which*

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggested that there are basic premises that critical race theorists would agree upon. The principal tenet is that racism in America is normal and structural, rather than isolated and individual. This particular tenet seems to be the "which"—as in, which tenet most offends those who oppose CRT. The common language among the laws, bans, restrictions, and regulations against critical race theory is "any discussion or teaching that the United States is inherently or fundamentally racist" (Hamilton, 2021). This is what Heritage Action for America (2023) said about the theory: "CRT holds to the idea that…America is systemically racist and must be dismantled" (para. 5).

Does CRT Call For An End to America. No, I, nor the many who work alongside me, do not want to dismantle America because of our notions about race and racism in this country. I want no harm to come to America; it is home. Yet, there are problems in this country that reckoning with and attending to social justice issues could

eliminate. Underservice to students of color is one example. I have been an educator long enough to realize how underperformance is often generational within demographics and communities. As such, the gravity of politics interfering with curricular and instructional choices is heavy, especially at a time when 20% of adults lack literacy and over 50% read below a 6th grade level (Zauderer, 2022). For me, I appreciate what critical interrogation can do for problematic issues in society. Utilizing the "fruit" of ongoing, constructive critique, I, like many, want to ensure the next generation is well educated and prepared today so that they can continue to build a better America tomorrow. But, because CRT opponents believe that the theory suggests an end goal of a "dismantled" America, they have proposed and, in many instances, enacted a range of laws and restrictions of its "teaching."

> The proposed bills and enacted statutes, however, will instead prevent educators, for fear of incurring threatened penalties, from teaching about the role of racism in U.S. history and engaging students in meaningful discussions about race. If they remain in place, the laws increase the chances that the next generation of students will remain uninformed of the racial history of the United States and its legacy and will thus come of age unmotivated—and unequipped—to improve upon it. (Hamilton, 2021, p. 61)

Does CRT Call America A Bigot. An implication of this study is the way critical race theory has been misrepresented and mischaracterized as an enemy of the public, a menace to polite society, and a pathway to indoctrination. Rather than a "doctrine of hate and division," CRT is a consciousness of the "pervasive structural and unexamined individual racism" in America (Hamilton, 2021, p. 63). Critical race theory challenges the

validity of the dominant narrative that diminishes the legacy of the removal of Indigenous people from their land, the enslavement of people from Africa, and other violent, oppressive, disenfranchising moments in American history. The "better narrative" is told within a context that dilutes the flavor of atrocity, such as anti-critical race theory legislation in Texas that requires teaching "slavery as a deviation from the founding principles of the United States" (Fortin & Heyward, 2022, para. 31). To that, anti-CRT Americans will not be emotionally pummeled by hateful history [e.g., Plessy vs. Ferguson, the 1867 burning of a Chinese American community, Emmitt Till, Jim Crow, Japanese internment camps, Antisemitism, to list a few] nor burdened by the implications of America's racist history on modern society. The "which" for critics of critical race theory is the insistence on acknowledging the hidden-in-plain-sight, systemic nature of racism, injustice, and oppression.

The *Why*

A review of the literature in Chapters 1 and 2 captures the anti-CRT sentiment, traces the movement back to the racial reckoning inspired by the George Floyd murder by police, and delineates proposals and legislation that address "the teaching of CRT in the classroom." In short, politicians, their sponsors, and constituents oppose critical race theory because they believe "that it is divisive, anti-American discourse that villainizes white people and indoctrinates young minds" (Duhaney, 2022, para. 3).

They Say, "Division and Indoctrination." The current governor of Florida said about CRT, "In Florida we are taking a stand against the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory" (DeSantis, 2021, para. 2). A North Carolina House of Representative stated, "This great education state must have an educational system that unites and

teaches our children, not divides and indoctrinates them" (Schoenbaum, 2023, para. 7). School officials in several California districts wrote executive orders referring to CRT as "a divisive ideology that can result in racial guilt" (Lambert, 2023, para. 16). A U.S. Congressman from Florida summed up the anti-CRT movement as putting an end to race and racism talk because such talk leads to further division (Sprunt, 2021). Many would agree that further division is not a progressive goal. Opposing divisiveness is not the concern for those on the other side of the CRT issue. The major problem with the "anti-divisiveness" movement is its regulatory wide-swath of DEI. Hoffman (2023) aptly pointed out that opponents of CRT are defining "critical race theory so nebulously that any classroom discussions about race, no matter how educational or innocuous, can readily be silenced by labeling them critical race theory (para. 5). That leads anyone concerned about teaching, learning, and DEI to wonder: How would legislators and officials suggest teachers go about making their content and approaches relevant for minoritized students if they must steer clear of race in the classroom? Absent from the results of this study is the way in which the anti-CRT movement is impacting students of color. What message is being sent to Black and Brown students by the anti-divisive concepts movement? A licensed clinical social worker and researcher said this about the impact of the anti-CRT movement on students of color:

> The current debate and pushback against the teaching of critical race theory in schools communicates to people of color that their lived experience, perspective, and daily struggle in a white supremacist society does not matter and will never matter. When kids believe they don't matter, this impacts identity, esteem, efficacy, and the ability to succeed. The debate and pushback represent yet

> another racial trauma, which brings with it an intense emotional and mental injury. (Cole, 2023, para. 32)

Others Say, "Power." Applebaum (2023) posited that the anti-CRT movement is less about discomfort and division and much more about a refusal of the mainstream—the power structure—to acknowledge another narrative and way of knowing. Grice (2022) said this about what is offered to most students in this country:

> Narratives and knowledge systems that support the dominance of white, cis-gendered male, heteronormative, middle and upper-class, English- speaking, able-bodied, and Evangelical Christian values and norms [and that those values and norms] in schools are driving the backlash we see in society and schools against equity, social justice initiatives, and CRT. (p. 31)

For students—and students of color in particular—releasing the grip on tightly held ideas, beliefs, and perspectives aids inquiry and discourse around the following:

- Whose identities are represented in what there is to know
- Whose history is told in what there is to know
- Whose experiences are "absent from or marginalized by" what there is to know. (Vindevoghel, 2016, p. 88)

Historically, relinquishing control over what and how much there is to know has been difficult. During the years of slavery and the years after, "white people have preserved their power by hoarding knowledge or banning the access of knowledge to Black people" (Bunts & Tawa, 2022, para. 2). In terms of "knowledge is power," for slaveowners who justified enslaving Black people because they were believed to be intellectually inferior and incapable of more than servitude, literacy among the enslaved would debunk their

reasoning (Coleman, 2020). To that, anti-literacy measures prohibited enslaved Black people from learning to read, write, and speak standard English, punishable by death (Beaubrun, 2020). For some, anti-CRT legislation is the 21st century equivalent of anti literacy laws. The following was lifted from newspaper archives of an antebellum issue of a Southern newspaper:

> Every school and college in the South should teach that slave society is the common, natural, rightful and normal state of society. Any doctrine short of this contains abolition in the germ: for, if it be not the rightful and natural form of society, it cannot last, and we should prepare for its gradual but ultimate abolition…To teach such doctrines we must have Southern teachers and Southern school books. It is from the school that public opinion proceeds, and the schools should be set right. No teacher should be employed in a private family or public school at the South, who is not ready to teach these doctrines. Parents, trustees and visitors should look to this thing. (Richmond Enquirer, 1856)

In all there is to know about CRT, CRP, DEI, and ELA, the discussion reduces to this: "Republicans are trying to use school boards and critical race theory to mobilize their voters" (Nierenberg, 2023, para. 1). This is the "why" of the anti-CRT movement.

The *How*

The "which" of the anti-CRT movement is systemic racism and the fragility associated with acknowledging inequality; the "why" is that such fragility rouses a particular political base and spurs increased voter participation. Votes equate to power. Every vote is one step closer to control. The "which" and the "why" are part of a sociopolitical agenda—a movement begun to rally a base. Such is politics. The problem

is that the anti-CRT movement is roaming hallways, classrooms, district offices, and state departments of education across the country, trampling over diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. That is much more than political action. To that, what this study was designed to elicit was the "how." How are teachers responding to politics playing out in their curriculum and instruction? How are practicing teachers navigating the anti-critical race theory movement? Findings indicate that these teachers keep their classrooms, teaching, and learning diverse, equitable, and inclusive by sustaining a distinct mindset and making strategic moves to serve their students. Their response to anti-CRT sentiment resounds as: *I teach the students in my classroom. The students in my classroom are from diverse backgrounds, racially, ethnically, linguistically, and more. The content and approaches I use are relevant to that diversity. No guilt trips or indoctrination here.* This response is built upon a collective perspective that acknowledges race, racism, and the implications of both within teaching and learning and society at large.

Race and Such

What follows is whether this response, the "how," complies with legislation and policies that insist on neutral, colorblind, non-divisive content and discourse. For the participants in this study, they consider their teaching practices to be in service to students and advocacy for equality rather than acts of noncompliance. They make "extra efforts" to protect diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching and learning because they appreciate the anti-CRT movement for what it is; they understand the "which" and the "why." Rather than the rejection of a legal theory, the movement is an objection to the "commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and to social justice in general" (Cuevas, 2022, p. 2). Under the influence of anti-CRT sentiment, many now indict equity work as

a rebuke of and hatred toward white people. This is sentiment inspired by former President Trump's executive order (Hamilton, 2021). That is, critics of CRT argue that "efforts to highlight and analyze the role of white supremacy in U.S. history, politics, and culture only serves to heighten racial divisions" (Farag,2022, October 21). In terms of a social movement aimed to protect students from discomfort and division, Cuevas (2022) observed and pondered the following about the anti-CRT movement:

> The clear implication was that issues of antiracism, social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are not topics to be discussed and promoted, but topics that should be prohibited and must be censured. But if anti-racism is a bad thing, does that mean that racism is the goal? If social justice is problematic, does that mean we should strive for injustice? Should inequity and exclusion be ideals for places of [learning]? (p. 2)

The hope is that most would instantly recognize the puzzling dynamics that exist within an effort to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, especially those targeted to better serve students seeking a public education. But, with the disinformation campaigns that have fueled the anti-divisive concepts movement, many want no part of "CRT-inspired" diversity, equity, or inclusion. Yet, it is the disinformation that actually informs the "how" of responding to the anti-CRT movement.

Disinformation and Truth

Cuevas (2022) poignantly asked, "How could a teacher successfully teach language arts without offering students a range of literature written by authors from a variety of backgrounds and without taking into account the language and culture of the readers?" (p. 1). The anti-CRT disinformation campaign would answer by mentioning

"traditional" literature that has stood the test of time across generations of ELA instruction and learners. The truth is that language arts curriculum is overwhelmingly white and relevant primarily to non-students of color—traditional and standing the test of time for white people (Sleeter, 2001). And this is precisely what critical race theory was designed to do: expose areas where racial dominance exists. Seemingly, no American who espouses to the ideals of freedom and equality for all would endorse racial dominance. Yet, critics of CRT have framed the theory as "anything taught in schools that would discuss racial inequality" (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 4). Again, this is evidence of a campaign intent on misinforming their base in an effort to drive their concerns all the way to the voting booth. And this practice of disinformation dates back decades.

> Our research demonstrates that conservative fearmongering over CRT reuses a set of scare tactics that equate racial justice with Communism that originated during the cold war. Conservative politician George Wallace once called the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "a fraud, a sham, and a hoax" and likened it to the Communist Manifesto. (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 6).

Findings from this research indicate that educators must treat misinformation with healthy doses of truth. The truth is that almost 80% of public school teachers identity as White and middle class (Schaeffer, 2021). To that, a 2017 poll of over 1100 educators found that less than half were affiliated with the Democratic party, with 30% identifying as Independent and 27% as Republican (Klein, 2021). These are teachers who engage with their students every day. They know their kids: their backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses. Moreover, like the participants in this study, the literature reveals that teachers know the factors that threaten the educational progress and social-emotional

wellbeing of their students. And CRT in the classroom has not been among those factors. Are there references to or depictions of dark moments in American history or disturbing conditions in society in the literature students read or discussions they have? Yes. Do educator standards call for teachers to facilitate critical thinking through complex topics for their students? Yes. That is true. What is not true is that critical thinking through and discourse around complex issues are inherently indoctrinating. What is not true is the rhetoric of widespread CRT-driven indoctrination by teachers or the need to restrict and criminalize future attempts. That is disinformation, and disinformation is dangerous. This is rhetoric centered on the frightening accusation that teachers are brainwashing, molding, and grooming children. Fear. Fear of teachers. Fear of public education. Fear of pushback and accusation. Fear. As the participants in this study pointed out: Anti-CRT legislation is about fear. "Fear and reticence in teaching about racism are the point of the law" (Waxman, 2022, para. 6). Implications of this research study suggest that it is critical cognizance, growth and development, intentionality, circumnavigation, and commitment that elevate these three teachers above fear of or reservation about maintaining a diverse, equitable, inclusive learning environment. That is "how" they do it.

Recommendations

The results of this research study prompted the following recommendations for practice. The recommendations center on the need for teacher support. By looking into the experiences of practicing English teachers who are making instructional choices daily, this research highlighted the ways three teachers are striking an "old balance" (between curricular and pacing guidelines and student need) within a "new" context

(amid the anti-critical race theory movement). Educator support has become more important than ever to ensuring teacher wherewithal to address the diverse learning needs within the modern classroom. Specifically, K-12 literacy proficiency requires continuous pedagogical attention, with students from diverse backgrounds in particular need of high-quality, relevant reading and writing instruction.

ELA/Literacy Teacher Support

After the 2020 executive order banning mandatory diversity training, professional learning across industries realized a significant decline in offerings. Portnoy et al., (2021) said about Trump's anti-diversity training executive order: It "ignored established evidence supporting the important role that diversity and inclusion trainings play" in enhancing professionalism and the service professionals provide (p. 181). To that end, the results of this study align with the notion that a choice for cultural relevance matters to students from diverse, minoritized, and marginalized backgrounds. Yet, there are few guidelines on how to meet students' needs in a culturally relevant way while remaining in anti-CRT compliance. That is, the decline in professional learning around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues makes it more difficult to maintain a current understanding of the district's goals and adjustments, in terms of education equity.

Rather Than "Going It Alone." The findings of this study indicate that teaching for cultural relevance and responsive involves a range of elements, from critical consciousness to continuous learning to civic involvement. The participants in this study maintain DEI in their practice but often find themselves figuring it out on their own. Curriculum support, professional collaboration, and administrative involvement around efforts to protect diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction are in order. My

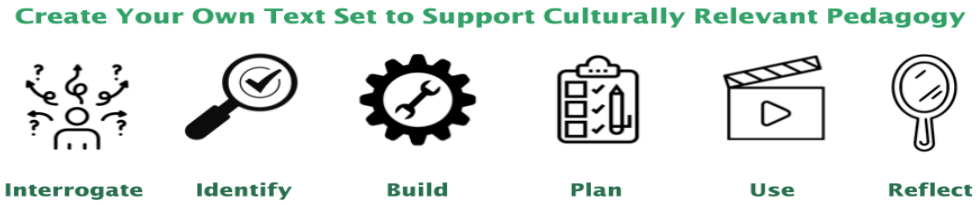
recommendation involves an initiative proposed to support teachers with the collaborative construction of culturally relevant text sets. Conceptually framed by the work of *Student Achievement Partners* and *Achieve the Core*, this professional learning opportunity is designed to: facilitate educator proficiency with selecting content that builds "knowledge and vocabulary through text sets that center culturally relevant pedagogy and students, particularly students who are often marginalized" within our schools and classrooms (Swanson et al., 2022, para. 3). I envision implementation in the following way:

The Plan. The initiative would be titled, *Building Culturally Relevant Text Sets: Balancing Students' Literacy Needs and Anti- Divisiveness Policy Compliance*. It would be a district-wide initiative available to English/ELA/Reading teachers. The theory grounding the work is based on the work of Ladson-Billings (2009) and learning sessions are driven by the following best practices for professional learning:

- content-centered,
- active and hands-on,
- collaborative and contextual,
- with modeling, coaching, feedback, and reflection over the course of two academic school years (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Table 5.1 highlights the conceptual framework supporting the initiative.

Table 5.1

Conceptual Framework for Professional Learning on Building Text Sets

Title of Professional Learning
Building Culturally Relevant Text Sets: Balancing Students' Literacy Needs and Anti-Divisiveness Policy Compliance
Learning Objective
Participants will be able to construct high-quality collections of texts selected to enhance cultural relevance and student affirmation yet remain in compliance with anti-"divisiveness" policy.
Conceptual Framework for Learning
 **Figure 3** Conceptual Framework for Guidance on Culturally Relevant Text Set Construction Note. This model was created by Student Achievement Partners with Achieve the Core in 2022. From "Creating Text Sets to Support Culturally Relevant Instruction" by C. Swanson, T. Filler, A. Williams, and T. Starks, 2022.
The concept framing this professional learning was developed by Swanson et al., (2022) through Achieve The Core. Exploring texts through the lenses of singular narrative/perspectives, world and current events, and identities, participants are guided through the process of interrogating content, identifying choice material, implementing the sets, and reflecting on their use to improve literacy. Probing questions include: ▪ What texts can be added to highlight additional voices, narratives, and perspectives? ▪ What texts can be added to highlight the relevance of real-world issues in modern society? ▪ What texts can be added to highlight the range of identities, languages, backgrounds, and experiences reflected among students? (Swanson et al., 2022)

Implementation. Participants will explore a range of literary and non-fiction and curriculum. Background knowledge and current need drive this PD. Utilizing deep reflection over the course of the learning, participants will construct fresh text sets in the following hands-on process:

- Reflect on current texts and content, using a culturally relevant pedagogy reflection tool
- Review student work and experiences (teacher's and students') with teaching and learning using particular texts
- Chart the GLOW texts and the GO texts, based on reflection on instructional text successes and failures

In addition to collaborative work during the sessions, participants will be asked to take the learning to back to the ELA teachers at their schools to stretch the process into their immediate context. During the sessions, participants will collaborate in the following ways:

- *Bring Two, Take Two* is a low-effort way for participants to use their background and instructional success to facilitate learning for their peers. Each participant brings two pieces to each session, labeled by grade span, text complexity, genre, topic, and a one- sentence "why this." A roundtable share-out will accommodate a bring-and-take exchange.
- Participants summarize their learning after each session that includes A-POST-FOR-MY- POST "ah-ha" from the knowledge, skill, or insight gained to be shared during campus PLCs or staff development.

Teacher Support. The facilitator will feature a culturally relevant text set portable display each session, modeling content, materials, resources, and alignment details for either middle school or high school curriculum. Participants will be provided supplies and materials to build displays during each March session. Participants will receive other models of text sets available through open-source materials. The facilitator

will also guide participants through the process of text selection and set building, lifting from Achieve the Core's professional learning resource on literacy improvement through the use of text sets. During each session, participants will be afforded breakout time to work on text setting, with the facilitator providing one-on-one coaching and support. Participants will receive facilitator feedback at the end of each breakout work session. The feedback sought will be targeted and succinct.

- Consider _____ a strong component of the text set you are generating.
- Think about _____ as you move forward with the text set you are generating.

Participants will have an opportunity to evaluate the learning process and whether the objective was met. Additionally, participants will be asked to submit their needs to help them further reach their professional learning goals for the PD. A third component of the evaluation gathers implementation feedback. Evaluation will be generated by Google Forms and released for use after each of the eight professional learning sessions. Table 5.2 outlines the plan for the professional learning initiative addressing literacy improvement, with a focus on incorporating cultural relevance into learning experiences.

Table 5.2
Professional Learning Overview

Professional Learning	Offering rigorous, relevant learning experiences to the diverse student population that makes up Glenndale-Clark School District is in line with one of the district's core values: aligning "resources to create equitable opportunities for students." Culturally relevant texts encourage wide-range reading and learner engagement with content that resonates with their background, experiences, and perspectives. Educators' capacity to construct high-quality collections of texts selected to embed cultural relevance and student affirmation yet remain in compliance with anti-"divisiveness" policy is the objective of this PD. Using a collaborative, ongoing approach to professional learning,

	participants will address the instructional need to bridge literacy skill gaps and fortify students' ability to read, comprehend, and produce complex text.	
Objective	Participants will be able to build culturally relevant text sets that are: • aligned to the state's Standard Course of Study • correlated to district-approved curricula • interest sparking and engagement sustaining • within the margins of content compliance.	
Audience	6-12 Teachers; Administrators; Instructional Support	
Duration	Quarterly, 6-Hour Sessions; two school year cycles	
	August 15, 2023 October 10, 2023 January 9, 2024 March 11, 2024	August 13, 2024 October 8, 2024 January 7, 2025 March 11, 2025
Continuing Education Units	48 Credit Hours	
Location	Glenndale-Clark District Conference Room	
Facilitator	Muzical Waite	

Participants will build upon their culturally relevant text selection skills each session. Through continuous feedback, reflection, collaboration, models and support, participants will be afforded the opportunity to build up to eight culturally relevant text sets with a structure for sharing the learning experiences within the context of their content PLCs over the course of two school years. Ensuring that this plan is initiated within the district, I first have to submit a proposal to the district's professional learning director who approves development courses. Upon course approval, the offering will be listed in the continuing education units catalogue, enabling participants to sign up. Finally, I will then advertise the opportunity on the district's ELA department resources page.

Reflection on the Research

New to action research, I had much to learn about planning and implementing this type of study. I was familiar with concepts such as hypothesis, participants, surveys, and quantitative data. However, qualitative methodology presented a learning curve. In that regard, some elements of the study were unexpected, while others were not.

The Expected

As expected, teachers possessed distinct perceptions of the anti-CRT movement. I expected that having time to relay their experiences with the political influences on their schools and classrooms via interview would be welcomed, as I have always known teachers to appreciate an opportunity and safe space to express their professional accomplishments and challenges. Many teachers have a "counter story" to tell, but they do not always have an audience (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). I hypothesized that teachers would be able to either 1) point to efforts they were making to maintain DEI in their classroom in the face of the culture war over CRT, or 2) suggest that they had avoided all mention of race, ethnicity, or identity during class discussion or in the materials they chose. The three participants fell within hypothesis #1.

The Unexpected

I did not expect to work with only three participants. It was not lost on me that critical race theory is a political boogeyman. I also considered how teachers and administrators across the country have been challenged, harassed, and fired for certain stances that CRT opponents did not like. In certain states, CRT affiliation is costly and can be criminalized.

> Tennessee aims to levy fines starting at $1 million and rising to $5 million on school districts each time one of their teachers is found to have "knowingly violated" state restrictions on classroom discussions about systemic racism, white privilege, and sexism…Teachers could also be disciplined or lose their licenses for teaching that the United States is inherently racist or sexist or making a student feel "guilt or anguish" because of past actions committed by their race or sex. (Pendharkar, 2021, paras. 1-2)

However, the setting of this study was not in Tennessee nor under state-legislated mandates regarding CRT. So, I did not expect such low interest in participating in a research study on such a highly visible issue. In terms of discussing and understanding CRT, each of the three participants communicated that, for many people, a lack of interest in such a study is "more of the same": aversion to "race talk." At this point in time in our society, "race talk" is essentially "illegal." I underestimated the affect anti-CRT sentiment and the impact the political movement is having on teachers. I did not expect 87 invitations to go out without response or acknowledgement. Perhaps all those who chose not to be considered for this study fall within hypothesis #2.

Changes

I would change the several aspects of this study in a hypothetical "do over." First, I would widen the window to elicit participation. I did not allow enough time to find a few more willing teachers to participate and share their experiences. My goal was a sample size of six. However, I was able to collect a tremendous amount of data from the three, brave teachers who did agree to participate. In fact, in lieu of a larger sample size, my second change would be incorporating an additional method of collection.

Observations or participant narratives would have garnered even more insight "into their world" as teachers practicing in the era of anti-CRT. Finally, another aspect of this study I would change would be the inclusion of a focus group interview. The main purpose of this study was to highlight how teachers are handling the current political climate around CRT and what they are doing in terms of DEI efforts in their classrooms. The study was inspired by a spirit of collaboration and the notion of "teaching sharing is teacher caring." The three participants in this study were extremely engaged and in tune with issues in education, especially educational equity; I posit that a focus group interview would have revealed additional gems of thought common with professional dialogue.

Take Aways

Despite the changes I would make if I could redo this study, new insights emerged for me. Yosso (2001) explained two decades ago that "racism and its intersections with discrimination based on gender, class, language, and immigration status" influence curriculum and perpetuate educational inequity (p. 93). From this study, I have been able to more fully appreciate just how much force policy-driven racism and discrimination exerts on schools and classrooms in the year 2023. One of the participants mentioned how stunned she was when her mentor brought to her attention the lack of diversity in the lesson that had just been presented; the participant admitted, "you just won't notice it." I, too, found myself reflecting on how little I reflected on the influence of the dominant culture on everything in my life, especially in my professional capacity. I began this study acknowledging that many Americans hate race talk. I was, however, naïve to just how uncomfortable social justice advocacy made some people. These are decent people who take Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream (1963) that his "four little

children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" and turn it into notions of colorblindness, meritocracy, and discouragement of dwelling on difference. How are teachers of color supposed to remove "dwelling on difference" from their classrooms when their very existence is undergirded by observable distinction from the dominant culture? How could I ever? Why should any of us ever?

His Dream. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. hoped that one day his children would "not be ***judged*** [bold italics added] by the color of their skin"; he didn't say, "not be ***seen*** by the color of their skin." Still, some believe that recognizing "color," as in students of color, teachers of color, or people of color, is a divisive practice in a society that has reached "post-racial" status (Dawson & Bobo, 2009). I, like others, including the three teachers represented in this study, believe that difference is not division—that our differences bring a "stone soup" (Graal, 2008) to society's table. [Or, within the context of school, teachers, and students: Our differences liken us to a fresh box of crayons—ready to illustrate the story of America in color.]

On A Personal Note. *Lives Matter* movements make so much more sense to me now. When policies, practices, issues, circumstances, and occurrences indicate that certain lives and lived experiences are insignificant, that is a major nudge to society to proclaim that they do, in fact, matter and will be elevated for all to see. Through reflection on this study and the insights lifted, I now believe that our country is in the midst of a political movement that is an enemy of the public, especially "public" schools. The anti-CRT movement is leveraging concern over "divisiveness" and "discomfort" to silence "race talk," suppress harsh history, and invalidate anti-racist work. Alfonseca

(2022) cited one teacher of color who said this about anti-CRT legislation: “Anti-race education efforts are an effort to turn back the clock on racial equality by hiding these key lessons from future generations -- and by erasing the history, trials and tribulations” of oppressed people (para. 14). That poignant observation, as well as the insights lifted from this research, has indelibly changed the way I understand educational oppression. In short, lives truly matter. Accurate historical teaching honors the lives lived before us. Counterstories appreciate the living history among us. And students’ lives are the gateway to the future ahead of us.

Limitations

In addition to the nature of interpretation and the subjectivity of deriving meaning from the experiences of others, a limitation in this study was the absence of counter perception of the anti-CRT movement. As each participant and the researcher harbored aligning feelings about the intentions and implications of the political push to decenter race, culture, and diversity in public schools, an opposing view would have enriched the findings. Though the research question probed what teachers were doing to protect DEI in their curriculum and instruction, an I-do-nothing-and-here’s-why perspective was missing from this study.

Another limitation of this study was that no participant taught under state legislation banning CRT/divisive concepts. Throughout the Southeast region of the U.S., states have enacted anti-CRT laws. For the three participants, legislation has been proposed and school boards throughout the area have adopted anti-CRT policies. However, the criminalization and harsh penalties are not yet applicable to the participants in this study. Insight, such as maintaining equitable content and instruction by

circumnavigating the diversity-challenged materials approved for use, may not have been as forthcoming from a participant practicing under anti-CRT law.

Suggestions for Improvement

Increasing sample size is a suggested improvement. Securing the participation of teachers who are culturally relevant practitioners (like the three in this study), those who are learning to be, and those who are not convinced they should be would provide a balanced look at what is happening in the classroom in the era of anti-critical race theory. Because anti-CRT laws seem vague to many and difficult to flesh out what is permissible and what would be considered non-compliant, including participants from areas with laws and/or policies and participants from areas without them would expand implications of the findings. Finally, classroom observations, document analysis of district communication around DEI in the classroom, and a focus group interview would enrich the data and deepen interpretations made about the "moves" teachers are making amid the anti-CRT movement and why.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research are evident as this study nears completion. Action research promotes the iterative nature of practice improvement by building on what has been examined and better understood to tackle emerging needs and problems as they arise (Efron & Ravid, 2020). From this study, I see the need for further investigation into ELA teachers' attitudes about culturally relevant literature instruction vs. "traditional" text study. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) asserted that "English teachers have a strong desire to be more antiracist in their literature instruction" (p. 10). I am not convinced that is true for all teachers. Future exploration could build on

this action research, seeking the perspectives of ELA teachers on advancing anti-racism in their literature instruction. Secondly, a survey of teacher sentiment on the influence of politics on teaching and learning is more appropriate than ever. One teacher of color had this to say about the influence of politics in the classroom:

> I lived through the Civil Rights era. I was a young child when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed … I am connected to the history and even stories that my mother has told me: growing up in the Deep South, during Jim Crow, voting rights and things of that nature. I bring all of that into my classroom and give a face to what I'm trying to teach my students. (Alfonseca, 2022, para. 5)

The next cycle of this study could easily center on the living-breathing-walking-talking "indoctrination" that teachers are by nature in their inability to remove who they are from their instructional service to students. There is literature on "the hidden curriculum" (LeCompte, 1978; Jackson, 1968) embedded in classrooms. Exploring the politics and social condition that seep out into the classroom would add to what is known about the hidden curriculum. Finally, future research involving the implementation of a course elective or exploratory club that allowed upper-class students to learn more about the "Crits" would demystify critical thought on social issues and add to what is known about how students interpret their experience with such learning. Critical race theory is one of multiple critical lenses for viewing aspects of society. One African American high school student asserted that "the retaliation against CRT shows that parents have no idea what students are learning — and that their protests are less about education and more about a projection of their own biases and fears (Calixte, 2022, para. 6). This student felt especially qualified to speak to the controversy over CRT in public schools, because she

is “one of the few high school students who have actually been taught CRT” (Calixte, 2022, para. 7). At Calixte’s (2022) Brooklyn, NY, high school, students have access to “short workshops on current controversial topics,” including critical race theory (para. 8). Calixte (2022) emphasized that “CRT also wasn’t presented as absolute and unchangeable truth” and that teachers encouraged students to speak up, voice their viewpoints, and explore the reasoning behind their perspectives and opinions (para. 14). To lift additional insight from students with these experiences would add vital perspectives to our consideration around and construction of curriculum and instruction.

Summary

This research study attempted to highlight how English teachers were adjusting to the anti-CRT movement. Because of the power of the written word and all that can be taken from literary experiences, the ELA classroom could be a space where teachers utilize their agency to expand literature study to include characters of color by authors of color. Before the anti-divisive concepts movement, English teachers held the power in their selection of texts and activities to expose students to a wide range of issues from diverse perspectives. Such expansion opens minds, attacks assumptions, and elevates consciousness. Anti-CRT sentiment—sentiment born of a political agenda to rally a faction of voters—holds that such open-mindedness, consciousness, DEI, and multiculturalism are coded concepts masking liberalism, anti-Americanism, and Marxism. In all, opponents of CRT accuse administrators, teachers, media specialists, and inclusive materials and discussions of division and indoctrination. This study found that three English teachers in this region are committed to navigating the anti-CRT rhetoric and maintaining a focus on equitable learning. But their commitment to delivering

diverse, equitable, inclusive curriculum and instruction is not "business as usual." Protecting DEI in the classrooms has, for years, meant making deliberate moves to meet students' needs.

I was reminded by these teachers what my years out of the classroom had shelved. I "relearned" what "meeting students' needs" meant. It is not a feel-good pitch to elevate our professional importance. "Needs" is a big concept. It is food. It is a bottle of water. It is a "gently used" prom dress. It is new books disappearing from the classroom library. It is tears over a poem that strikes an emotional chord. It is learning "Lift Every Voice and Sing." It is having someone to "come out" to. It is a recommendation letter. It is having a teacher-hero in the community theater audience on opening night. It is restorative discipline. It is lunch money on a field trip. It is the smiley face and "good point" comment on an essay. It is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937). It is delivering make up work to *this side of town*. It is seeing me and hearing me and making me a part of your life.

The participants in this study never suggested that meeting students' needs is an easy task nor did they shy away from spotlighting factors that make their jobs harder. Moreover, each teacher communicated a sense of *Shame on anyone who would use students and their education as pawns to advance a personal or political agenda*. But, overwhelmingly, these three participants situated their narrative of ELA teaching within "the lives of their students" and "their needs for learning." In all, critical cognizance, continuous growth and development, intentionality, circumnavigation, and commitment thematically collectivize what it takes to advance educational equity. But, as Ladson-Billings (2021) asserted, it is much more than that. Striving for diversity, equity, and

inclusion in the classroom in face of anti-CRT rhetoric and policies—not to mention post-pandemic readjustment, increased school violence and volatility, and teacher shortages and increased responsibilities—is much more than a set of "moves." The findings of this study indicate that their efforts stem from a heightened awareness that students' lives matter.

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APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTORY E-MAIL

Hello!

My name is Muzical Waite, and I am completing a doctorate program in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Carolina. This study will help fulfill my degree requirements. I am reaching out to English/ELA/literacy teachers throughout the region, in hopes that some are willing to participate, anonymously and confidentially, in my research study.

I am studying the phenomenon of teachers making curricular and instructional decisions. Specifically, I am exploring the English teacher's autonomy, agency, and text selection wherewithal amid the current socio-political climate around "divisive concepts." If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete one open-response survey online and one virtual, one-on-one interview. The survey and interview will take place at mutually agreed upon times. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete, and the interview should last an hour. The interview will be videotaped so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Again, participation is confidential. There will be no reference to your campus, district, or state of employment. Pseudonyms will ensure anonymity.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (5*1) 519-**** or mdwaite@email.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Todd Lilly at (8*3) 377-**** or lillyt98@email.sc.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please complete the survey by February 15, 2023, or request a virtual interview via the email address listed above to discuss the next step.

With kind regards,

Muzical Clark Waite

APPENDIX B: OPEN RESPONSE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. With what racial, ethnic, or cultural demographic do you most closely identify?
2. What is your age range?
3. What pronouns do you use?
4. How many years have you been an educator?
5. How would you describe your K-12 setting? Rural, urban, suburban, charter?
6. What have been your favorite texts to teach? Why
7. What is your favorite English/ELA teaching and learning activity? Why?
8. What factors contributed to your participation in this study?
9. Think about Louis Armstrong's classic tune, "What a Wonderful World". What improvements to education in America would make you think to yourself, "what a wonderful world"?
10. What questions do you have about this study and/or your participation in it?

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Researcher to Participant: please describe your experiences with text selection, planning, and content choices during the recent anti-critical race theory movement.

1. Share with me your journey to becoming an English/ELA teacher.
2. Tell me about any exposure, education, or training you have had on culturally relevant education, diversity-equity-inclusion, or anti-racism/anti-bias?
3. What is your response to the current anti-Critical Race Theory movement?
4. How has the anti-Critical Race Theory movement impacted your curricular choices, i.e., text selection, current events/news articles, videos?
5. How has the anti-Critical Race Theory movement impacted your instructional choices, i.e., whole-group discussion, Socratic seminar, group work, argumentative writing prompts, social justice debates?
6. What do you think anti-Critical Race Theory legislation/restrictions/climate-culture means for teacher autonomy and professional respect?
7. What do you think anti-Critical Race Theory legislation/restrictions/climate-culture means for diversity-equity-inclusion in the English/ELA classroom?
8. What do you think anti-Critical Race Theory legislation/restrictions/climate-culture means for student engagement and achievement—particularly students with marginalized identities?

APPENDIX D: BOOKLIST DATA

	7th Grade Approved Book List	11th Grade Approved Book List	12 Grade Approved Book List	Advanced Placement & International Baccalaureate Approved Book List
Number of Books on the Approved List	**70**	**169**	**75**	**320**
Number of Culturally Diverse Books on the Approved List	**22**	**34**	**0**** **2*****	**78**
Percentage of Culturally Diverse Books Represented on the Approved Book List	**30%**	**20%**	**2%**	**24.3%**

***Culturally diverse refers to *People of Color*. *People of Color* within the context of this chart means those who are racially and ethnically minoritized.**By POC about POC ***

Figure: D.1
Cultural Diversity Represented Within Approved Book Lists