Decentering the White Gaze: The Effects of Involving African-American Students in Curricular Decision-Making in an Independent School Library

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DECENTERING THE WHITE GAZE: THE EFFECTS OF INVOLVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS IN CURRICULAR DECISION-MAKING IN AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL LIBRARY

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, who taught me the value of education; my husband, who supports me in everything I do; and my two daughters, who are making the world a better place.
ABSTRACT

Many Black students at independent schools across the nation spend most of their educational lives with few classmates or teachers who look like them. This isolation is exacerbated by a curriculum that historically has taught to a White standard of excellence. Long the bastion of wealthy, White families, independent schools have generally failed to make headway in their efforts to recruit Black families to their campuses. This has left Black students with the burden of finding their own methods of adapting to a predominantly White school environment. This study sought to determine how involving four African-American fourth-grade students in a diversity audit of a Lower School library collection would impact their feelings about attending an independent school. Results showed that while these students had developed effective coping skills on their own, giving them authority over the library collection increased their positive feelings about the school as well as their sense of belonging. Students felt the project was important, both for themselves and for younger Black students at the school. Further, these African-American fourth graders felt the curriculum should offer more opportunities for students to voice their opinions and make choices about what they learn. Alongside these curricular changes, students said that school leaders should intensify their efforts to recruit more Black students and teachers to these campuses.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Celebrated author Toni Morrison once said, “I have spent my entire writing life trying make sure that the White gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books” (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). Her comments speak to the difficulty African Americans face trying to center their own experience in a world that values Whiteness. For one group of Black Americans, however, this White gaze might instead be characterized as a blinding stare. Black students in predominantly White independent schools spend most of their time at school with few people who look like them or know what it is like to stand in their shoes. For these students, the experience can be lonely and uncomfortable (Moore-Southall, 2016).

As of 2019-20 there were more than 30,000 private schools in the United States, but independent schools make up a small minority of these (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; National Association of Independent Schools, 2023). White students enroll in independent schools more than any other demographic. About 30% identify as students of color, with African Americans comprising 6.5% of this group. Considering that day school tuition averages $27,950 per year, most students who attend these schools come from families of means — a tradition that dates back several centuries (French, 2018).

Problem of Practice

One programmatic criticism of independent schools is that few African Americans see themselves in their schools’ curricula (Arrington & Stevenson, 2006; French, 2018).
This is the case at Sedgefield Academy (a pseudonym), where Black students make up only 8% of the population, according to school statistics. Efforts to recruit diverse students to this independent school in the southeastern U.S. have been successful among Asian groups, but the school has found it difficult to make headway in the African-American community, which census records show makes up more than 37% of the city’s population. In a 2020 memo to administrators, parents of these students said the curriculum is racially biased and portrays Whiteness as the standard for student excellence (Parents of Black and African-American Students, personal communication, 2020). The problem of practice in this study, therefore, is that many African-American students at Sedgefield Academy do not see themselves in the curriculum they study, and this lack of representation harms students.

One example that parents cite takes place in the Lower School division. Until recently, a unit about Ellis Island gave students the opportunity to learn about one of the largest waves of immigration in U.S. history. In the memo to administrators, parents said African-American students should have the same chance to learn about their history.

The same opportunities should be available for students to learn about slavery, and the establishment and perpetuation of systemic racism. This rich history is instrumental in understanding the contributions that free slave labor had on developing the economic and social infrastructure of the United States of America. (Parents of Black and African-American Students, personal communication, 2020, Agenda 4)

The curriculum should also “integrate the works of Black and African-American scholars, scientists, doctors, activists, and artists into curriculum to fully explore their
contributions” (Parents of Black and African-American Students, personal communication, 2020, Agenda 4). Parents were joined in their efforts by an email petition from fellow students, alumni, and faculty who wrote, “Rather than waiting for change to happen to us, we should engineer our own progress based on our community’s unique circumstances and history” (Sedgefield Faculty, Committing to Racial Equity and Education at Sedgefield Academy, personal communication, 2020). They stated that Sedgefield Academy should “work to promote tangible change by fostering difficult conversations on race inside and outside of the classroom” (Sedgefield Faculty, Committing to Racial Equity and Education at Sedgefield Academy, personal communication, 2020, para. 3)

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Black students feel about attending Sedgefield Academy and if a curricular intervention, in the form of a library diversity audit, would affect their attitudes. Specifically, I asked the following questions:

1. How might an invitation to Black students to diversify the library collection change how they feel about attending a predominantly White independent school?

2. What changes to the library collection would these students suggest to make the curriculum at a predominantly White independent school more culturally responsive to them?

I focused my research on the Lower School library curriculum, i.e., the books that are available for students to borrow. I sought participation from the six Black students in the fourth grade.
To investigate this problem, I examined the history and culture of independent schools and the issues Black students face there. I also examined articles on the planned intervention. While there is little empirical evidence about diversity audits performed by elementary students, I pulled from data collected at the college level. To supplement, I researched the effects of student voice and choice in the classroom. First, however, I placed my research within two theoretical frameworks: culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and self-determination theory. These address both motivation and the curricular supports needed for students to achieve success.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Culturally sustaining pedagogy builds upon the seminal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), who decades ago pushed back against the deficit approaches used to teach African-American students. Instead of being made to fit into the educational mainstream, she wrote, students should be taught with a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) that “addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Paris (2012) added to this work by suggesting that the terms *relevant*, or *responsive* as it is sometimes called, do not go far enough. The concept of power and agency need to be present as well, he wrote.

The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. (Paris, 2012, p. 95)
A culturally sustaining pedagogy, in other words, explicitly calls for the maintenance of support systems that would enable the continuation of pedagogy that allows for multiple languages, cultures, and literacies in the educational environment.

In forming the theory of self-determination, Ryan and Deci (2000) found that all humans are oriented toward psychological growth but need support for three basic needs — autonomy, relatedness, and competence — to flourish. In the classroom, autonomy refers to a student’s ability to act independently and make choices, while relatedness refers to a connection with adults and other students. Competence is a student’s perception of their ability to master material and succeed (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory posits that the more teachers and schools provide support for these three basic needs, the more a student will thrive academically, physically, and mentally. In the last 20 years SDT has prompted more research than almost any motivational theory (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). It involves a taxonomy of motivation that includes both extrinsic (externally controlled) and intrinsic (internally controlled) motivation. While it is always preferable for students to be intrinsically motivated, they can also develop healthier attitudes when controls are imposed from the outside. They can be externally motivated if they understand the value of an assignment and feel that it is worthwhile to complete. The assignment can be even more motivating if its value matches their own internal values (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Positioning my problem of practice within two theoretical frameworks will allow me to investigate how involving Black students in curricular decision-making might alter the school’s curriculum, and in turn, affect student attitudes about the school. Before discussing the method for doing this, however, I must mention my role in this research study.
Positionality

As a faculty member at the school and Lower School Librarian, I was in a unique position to investigate this problem. I teach all of the almost 300 students in the division and have a great deal of access to them. Our scheduling process is flexible, allowing teachers to sign up for library classes with me. As a result, it was easy for me to schedule classes to teach lessons on identifying bias, empathy, inclusivity, and representation in children’s literature, as well as classes detailing how to conduct a diversity audit. As I did, I kept two issues in perspective: my role as a White, female, cisgender librarian; and my role as collection development manager. Both roles place me in a position of power over students.

The two identities that were the hardest to accommodate were my race and role as collection development manager. Several times during the oral interview process, the fact that I was White was uncomfortable for both me and the students. It was clear that they did not want to hurt my feelings when criticizing the lack of diversity among the teaching staff. No matter how often I told them not to worry, they seemed to do so anyway. Additionally, when some students criticized the lack of diversity in the collection, I could feel myself becoming defensive. I worked hard to keep those feelings in check. Instituting critical friends to help me process these feelings was a helpful step in the research process, which I will now explain in detail.

Methodology

My study falls under the domain of qualitative action research. To qualify as such, the investigator assumes that meaning is “constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Because the research is an in-depth analysis of a system that is limited in size and scope, i.e., bounded, it is also classified as a case study. It is falls under the category of ethnography because it studies the culture of the group.

The group of participants consisted of four African-American students at Sedgefield Academy. The fourth graders examined library books for elements of bias, empathy, inclusivity, and representation after undergoing a series of lessons prepared by the researcher. Once they made their assessment via a Google form, they were able to choose new books for the collection from a database that specializes in diverse literature. They also took a field trip to an all-Black bookstore in town to select books.

Fourth graders were specifically chosen for this project because they are the oldest in the Lower School and were, therefore, the most able to understand and articulate concepts around the four identified themes. While the diversity audit was done four classes of 18 students, only the data from the four Black students was collected and analyzed. I used purposeful sampling, trying to recruit all six African-American students in the grade, but only five agreed. One dropped out midway through the study, resulting in four total participants.

Observations were particularly important during the intervention phase. The researcher was an “observer participant,” (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 144) whose primary role was to observe groups as they conducted the diversity audit. In this case I was a peripheral rather than active member of the group, and while observing I noted factors including the physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversations, and non-verbal and physical cues.
The intervention was anchored by both pre- and post-audit interviews. This included individual interviews and a focus group. The first round of interviews set to establish how students felt about attending Sedgefield. This data, combined with findings from an engagement survey, gave me a good idea of the attitudes each student brought to the intervention. The concluding activity was a culturally sustaining library walk, during which students were able to offer opinions about making the library space more culturally sustaining for areas other than the collection.

As mentioned earlier, I used critical friends to help process the information as it was gathered. I also took detailed notes after each session to ensure rich description. Further, during data collection, I remained flexible, asking follow-up questions when necessary. I analyzed information immediately after collecting it to ensure I understood it and to tweak upcoming interview sessions.

Data were analyzed through an inductive process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the data were gathered and organized, I coded each interview to highlight important keywords and phrases. I then compared the keywords and phrases among each interview to develop themes. Because most of the African-American students felt similarly about their experiences at Sedgefield, it was possible to quickly identify common codes. Differences resulted mainly from how strongly participants felt in certain areas. In addition to the considerations outlined, good qualitative research is rigorous, credible, and ethical (Tracy, 2013). By triangulating my findings through feedback from participants, saturated data collection, and considering alternative explanations for data findings, I tried to meet these standards.
Summary of Findings

Six themes emerged from this study. The first three are tied to the engagement survey and the subsequent interviews. First, African-American fourth graders at Sedgefield Academy want their educational life to include more students and teachers who look like them. They recounted stories of discomfort with being the only Black student in a classroom, having to represent Black culture to White students who do not understand, and being unable to identify with the adults who teach them. Second, they talked about a curriculum that reflects White narratives. Black stories are usually featured in special assemblies or during Black history month, they explained. Despite these feelings, however, the third finding showed that these students have developed the skills necessary to remain connected to the school. They specifically mentioned the value of attending an independent school because it affords them the opportunity to participate in activities not available elsewhere. Most had made good friends and mentioned sibling or other relatives’ connections to the school.

The second set of themes was drawn from the intervention, subsequent oral interviews, and the culturally sustaining library walk. First, students felt strongly that their participation in the diversity audit was valuable and that their actions to improve the collection made a difference to themselves and others. They spoke about making things better for the younger Black students in the school. Some mentioned that having access to books with characters who looked like them influenced their motivation to read. One said that she felt the process of learning about representation in books had made her friendships stronger because she realized that opinions other than her own were important. Second, students said their belonging increased after participating in the diversity audit, even though
they already had a good connection to the school. Acting to update and refine the collection appeared to provoke a feeling of ownership over it. One student said the diversity audit lessons helped him to understand that people out there are trying to change the status quo for underrepresented groups. Third, students said that they would like to see activities that offer freedom and choice incorporated into other areas of the school community. They acknowledged that they feel more engaged in and competent with activities that are meaningful to them. They gave examples of this type of success in writing and math.

**Significance of Study**

If independent schools are to successfully recruit and retain African-American students, they must have a curriculum that is meaningful and relevant to their lives. Some parents at Sedgefield Academy say this is not the case. Perhaps this is why the population of African-American students there has only increased 1.4% over the last 25 years (Sedgefield Academy, 1998). And according to research done at other independent schools, the situation is similar (French, 2018). For decades, independent schools have sought to increase these numbers, with little movement (National Association of Independent Schools, 2008; National Association of Independent Schools, 2023).

Through rich description of the situation at Sedgefield, along with data from four African-American student participants, I hope that this study can be used to help other independent schools. The history and culture of these schools is one of White privilege, often providing access to the nation’s best colleges and universities. It is only fair that African-American students be afforded these same opportunities. Otherwise, these schools are just reproducing the elite in a system that reinforces inequality. But how do we attract Black students to these campuses? My research project suggests that by instituting
culturally relevant teaching strategies in all areas of the curriculum, Black students will feel more comfortable in these White spaces. Interviews with students show that they are empowered by the ability to make things better for themselves and those around them. When confronted with the challenges they face as minorities in a predominantly White school, they thrive when given the freedom and choice to improve and refine curriculum.

There is little prior research in this specific area. This study is therefore significant because there are few empirical studies that examine the role of elementary students in curricular decision-making. And, I could find no studies that deal with this type of work in an elementary library. Further, research into the experience of Black students at independent schools is also scarce, and when conducted, usually takes place in higher grades (Arrington & Stevenson, 2006).

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is presented in five sections. The first chapter has introduced the problem and the research questions designed to investigate it. Next, I present the literature related to the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and self-determination, as well as articles relating to the intervention. This will detail what else has been written about this problem and possible solutions to it. The third chapter deals with the methodology employed in this qualitative action research project, i.e., how the study was conducted, as well as the types of data collected. Chapter 4 lists the findings and analysis of the research, including more about the six themes identified. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the implications of the study and ideas for future research.

Gloria Ladson-Billings described segregated White schools as the next frontier for equity work (Will, 2022). While she was referring to the need to increase the cultural
competence of White students, she was clear in her unwavering view that Black students in America have been left behind. Schools still are not preparing these students to fight back against the inequities they face, she stated. This is especially true of Black students who attend White institutions. They attend schools with classmates who often fail to understand them, and they learn from a curricula that typically does not include them. In the case of Sedgefield Academy, their parents say this impacts their children in a negative way. But what do these students do while their White counterparts — and the curriculum they study — are catching up? It is my hope that this research project will contribute to possible solutions.

**List ofDefinitions**

The following list provides definitions central to this study:

*Action research*: a systematic process performed by or with an organization or community member to address a specific, local problem and improve the status quo (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

*Culturally sustaining library walk*: a tool for school personnel to assess the responsiveness of a library’s collection and programming to the school’s Black Indigenous Youth of Color (BIYOC) (Hughes-Hassell, 2004).

*Diversity audit*: an inventory that determines what is in a collection and what areas need to be further developed (Jensen, 2018).

*Independent schools*: schools that receive no public funding and are independent of any other organization. They are governed by a board of trustees (Dolin, 2020).
Qualitative research: an inquiry that seeks to understand the experiences of others and how they make sense of their world. Researchers collect data through observations and questions and use a variety of techniques to interpret it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Predominantly White independent schools can be uncomfortable places for African-American students, especially when they do not see their lives reflected in the curriculum they study (Newcomb, 2020; Arrington & Stevenson, 2006). Some scholars attribute this phenomenon to the idea that White privilege has afforded the dominant group ownership of the intellectual property of schools, curriculum (Chapman, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a result, the stories of minoritized groups have largely been silenced in the lessons and instructional strategies used by the nation’s teachers. When the curriculum does include the voices of African Americans, it is often through painful topics such as slavery or during a month-long unit devoted to the study of the Black experience in America (Arrington & Stevenson, 2006). This makes for a “very myopic, very closed view of Black history” (Moore-Southall, 2016, p. 91).

The problem of practice in this study is this sense of discomfort felt by African-American students at Sedgefield Academy, a majority White independent school in the southeastern United States. In a 2020 petition to administrators, a Black and African-American parent group wrote that the curriculum did not allow their students to identify with the school and neglected the impact that the free labor of enslaved persons had on the development of the economy and social infrastructure of the United States.

The purpose of this study is to determine if involving students in curricular decision-making will make the curriculum more responsive to students and increase their sense of
belonging. Specifically, I am asking, “How will a radical act aimed at de-centering Whiteness at Sedgefield Academy affect marginalized Black students?” Further, how might the library curriculum become more culturally responsive to its African-American students if they are allowed to develop, supplement, and refine it? Does this action increase their sense of belonging in the school? Additionally, what changes would the students suggest? This query is like the one posed by Irizarry (2017) in his study of Latinx high school youth. He wondered what instruction would look like if these students were given the power to create “sustaining classroom environments” (Irizarry, p. 83) for themselves and others. I too wondered what my curriculum (library books) would look like if African-American students were given the authority to weed out titles and purchase others. Would students feel the collection served them better? Would they feel empowered by taking such action? And would any sense of empowerment contribute to them feeling more a part of the school community?

**Purpose and Strategy of the Literature Review**

In investigating this problem of practice, it is crucial to examine each piece of the puzzle. My search strategy involved separating the problem into keywords and phrases. I settled upon the following: African Americans in independent schools, the history and culture of independent schools, culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy, library diversity audits, student voice and choice, and student belonging. I thought it wise to start with an examination of research about the lives of African-American students in U.S. independent schools. What is the culture of these predominantly White institutions? How do African- American students fit into it? While research is still scarce in this area, a few studies do provide relevant findings and discussion.
Second, I looked at the history and practice of culturally responsive curriculum, which includes a focus on the intervention in this research project — a library diversity audit. While I could find no data for elementary, middle, or high schools, there were a few published studies involving college students and such audits. I did, however, find many articles by librarians about the need for diversity audits. This is not surprising because in 2018 the American Association of School Librarians issued new standards that included equity and diversity. Afterwards, a major trade journal issued guidelines on performing diversity audits of library materials (Jensen, 2018). Since then, audits have become a popular procedure in school libraries across the country. This study, therefore, addresses a gap in the literature regarding library audits in elementary schools.

Despite the lack of empirical studies on diversity audits, however, there are relevant articles about the effect student voice and choice have in the classroom. These will be discussed to understand the potential impact a diversity audit could have on African-American students. Before I discuss the available research in these areas, however, I will review the literature on the two theories that frame this research project: culturally responsive pedagogy and self-determination theory.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy emerged from the shadows of school desegregation efforts of the 1970s (Sleeter, 2012). Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal educational facilities were unconstitutional in 1954, it would take significantly longer — in some cases decades — for schools throughout the country to move towards integrating their campuses (Purdy, 2018; Orfield, 2004). Once they did, Black and White students were learning side by side for the first time. Add to that an increase in multicultural
student enrollment brought about by the 1972 ruling that public schools must provide academic assistance to non-English speaking students, and most teachers found themselves with more diverse classrooms than ever before. Many struggled to find instructional strategies that met the needs of all learners (Sleeter, 2012). Researchers, therefore, began investigating different pedagogical methods to meet this demand.

Over the years various terms were coined for these types of instructional strategies (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Sleeter, 2012 as cited in Aronson & Laughter, 2016). They were called *culturally appropriate* by Au (1980), *culturally congruent* by Mohatt and Erickson (1981, as cited in Aronson & Laughter), and *culturally compatible* by (Jordan, 1985). In 1994, however, Ladson-Billings produced the landmark work, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Instead of looking for what was wrong with Black students, she urged educators to look for what was right. These students were not “deficient White children,” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 9) but students who would respond to what she labeled “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 15) that would meet their specific needs. She asserted that the problem stemmed from the lack of recognition of African Americans as a distinct cultural group. When students were taught in ways that honored their culture, they succeeded, even thrived, because they were empowered “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20). Specifically, culturally responsive pedagogy embraces three tenets: student learning, cultural competence (of one’s own culture and others), and critical consciousness.

In 2012, Paris added to the work of Ladson-Billings by asking three questions:
• Is the work being done in the name of CRP really keeping the cultural and linguistic practices of non-dominant cultures in place?
• Is the work prompting action against systemic inequity?
• Is a change in terminology needed to communicate the idea of maintaining these culturally responsive practices in the classroom?

Paris proposed reinforcing CRP with a culturally sustaining pedagogy, which would “perpetuate and foster — to sustain — linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). This idea supported literacy competence within non-dominant groups (African American and Spanish, for example) and across the dominant group (American English). It also called for non-dominant groups to accept both their emerging youth cultures in addition to their time-honored traditions. In 2017, Paris and Alim wrote that non-dominant groups should adopt a critical stance toward budding cultural practices to ensure they are beneficial to the group.

**Self-determination Theory**

The second theory I will use in my research concerns motivation. Self-determination theory (SDT) states that students thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to one’s ability to govern and make decisions for themselves; competence refers to how one judges their own abilities; relatedness refers to one’s feelings of belonging in a certain environment. Ryan and Deci studied these needs in relation to both intrinsic motivation (doing a task because it is enjoyable) and extrinsic motivation (doing a task because it is required). The researchers viewed intrinsic motivation as being innate in humans, as evidenced by the fact that healthy babies who feel safe are curious and will put themselves in situations that help them learn
and grow. Once children get older, however, outside social forces intervene, and this sense of well-being becomes threatened. Their research, therefore, focused on what buttresses or diminishes self-motivation. Ryan and Deci found that intrinsic motivation was preferable because students are actively choosing to involve themselves in the activity versus being told do it (i.e., extrinsically motivated). They used a sub-theory of STD, called cognitive evaluation theory, to identify the exact social and environmental factors that brought about increases or decreases in this type of motivation.

First, intrinsic motivation is only stimulated by activities that are judged as valuable by the student. Second, positive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation, while negative feedback diminishes it. Third, any type of material tangible reward or “threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, or imposed goals diminish intrinsic motivation because, like tangible rewards, they conduct toward an external perceived locus of causality” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Fourth, students who are taught by more controlling teachers exhibit less intrinsic motivation and learn less effectively than those who are taught by teachers who offer more flexible teaching strategies. Finally, anchoring activities in classrooms where students feel safe to take risks increases motivation from within.

Ryan and Deci (2000) also examined extrinsic motivation, or behavior which is motivated by an outside force. Their taxonomy of self-determination included four levels of extrinsic motivation, starting with external regulation, which concerns behavior brought about by rewards or punishments. The next two — introjection and identification — involve the increasing recognition of the task’s overall worth. The final level — integration — is achieved when the student has embraced the importance of the task and has incorporated it into their own value system. They found that relatedness is especially
important in achieving internalization. Therefore, students who have internalized an activity have integrated it into their value system partly because they feel connected to their teachers, classmates, and parents. Competence and autonomy play an important part as well. Students who feel that they can successfully perform an activity that they have chosen would be more likely to see it as valuable. This speaks to the lack of well-being among students who are forced to complete activities before they are developmentally ready.

To integrate a regulation, people must grasp its meaning and synthesize that meaning with respect to their other goals and values. This “deep, holistic processing (Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998) is facilitated by a sense of choice, volition, and freedom from excessive external pressure toward behaving or thinking a certain way. In this sense, support for autonomy allows individuals to actively transform values into their own” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74).

I believe both culturally responsive pedagogy and self-determination theory serve as solid foundations for the research I pursued. The goals of each provide strategies to ensure the success of all students, especially those from non-dominant groups. Taken together, I believe these theories frame three main themes applicable to my investigation:

- African-American students need to see themselves reflected in their school and its curriculum.
- African-American students need opportunities to learn about their world, develop effective strategies to challenge the status quo, and act against it.
- African-American students need to feel connected to a learning community.

These themes served as the conceptual framework for my project, which I will discuss now.
African-American Students in Independent Schools

As of 2019, there were more than 30,000 private schools in the United States serving almost five million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Most of these institutions have either a religious focus or specific curricular ideology, such as Montessori or Waldorf schools. Independent schools make up a small minority of the private schools in America, with about 1,300 boarding or day schools that enroll about 615,000 students (National Association of Independent Schools, 2023). Each of these schools operates as a non-profit and is overseen by a board of trustees, according to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). They receive funding through tuition and charitable contributions and are accredited via state or regional associations (NAIS, 2023). Independent schools are also well-known for another statistic: they are overwhelmingly White. On average, students of color make up 33.2% of the student body. The highest percentages with this category are: two or more races (9.7%), Asian American (8.9%), and unsure about race/ethnicity (6.8%).

Considering that independent day school tuition averages $27,950 per year, the students who attend these schools most often come from families of means — a tradition that started long ago. The first independent school established in the United States was Collegiate School, founded in 1628 in New York City, and many sprang up shortly after (French, 2018). Since that time, these schools have been bastions of “status and power” (French, 2018, p. 15). Up until the 1960s these campuses mostly taught the sons (and later daughters) of the nation’s wealthiest White families. In general, it was not until the Civil Rights Movement that these institutions began their attempts to diversify, seeking out African-American students. These attempts were primarily in areas other than the
southern United States, where desegregation faced intense protest following the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision.

Clotfelter (2004) studied the rise of private school enrollment in the South since school desegregation. He found that while the South started out as the region of the country where private schools were less important, that was no longer the case after desegregation. He wrote, “Over the period 1960 to 2000, whereas the share of all students attending private schools in the United States dropped by more than 3 percentage points, the share in the South increased by 4 percentage points” (Clotfelter, 2004, p. 77). In one Southern state – North Carolina – private school enrollment increased by one-third between 1970 and 1971. Due to the timing of this rise and the areas where enrollment increased, he stated, the main impetus was the desire by White parents to keep their children from attending school with Black students.

Currently the population of African-American students at Sedgefield Academy sits at 8%. This is only a 1.4% rise in the last 25 years, according to school statistics (Sedgefield Academy, 1998; Sedgefield Academy, 2023). In 1996, the school included a goal of increasing the enrollment of non-White students in its strategic plan. Recommendations called for the creation of mentor programs for minority students and parents, the scheduling of dinners and social events, an increase in diversity marketing, inclusion of minority parents on committees and boards, exit interviews with minority families who planned to leave, professional development for faculty, and curriculum revision, especially in English and history (Sedgefield Academy, 1998). The goal of increasing minority enrollment has remained a part of the school’s strategic initiatives ever since, and there has been overall growth in the percentage of students of color at the
school, but little progress has been made specifically in the recruitment of African-American students.

**Independent School Culture**

The culture of independent schools is not only one of White privilege, but also college preparation. Nearly all the students who graduate attend college, and 85% matriculate the year after they graduate from high school (Torres, 2018). At Sedgefield Academy, records show it averages 99%. It is commonplace for these schools to list the names of the colleges their recent graduates will attend in the editions of their summer magazines.

In 2017 NAIS partnered with Gallup to survey how college experiences differed between independent school graduates and those of public and non-independent private schools (Torres, 2018). A random sample of 41,395 respondents 18 years or older, with a bachelor’s degree or higher, were interviewed. The study involved the assessment of five categories of well-being: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. The percentages listed below refer to independent school (IS), private not independent (PNI), and public (P). Results showed that NAIS graduates:

- Finish their degrees on time or earlier (IS-77%, PNI-69%, P-64%)
- Are less likely to transfer (IS-22%, PNI-31%, P-37%)
- Take greater advantage of experiential learning opportunities, such as research with faculty (IS-55%, PNI-40%, P-40%)

They are also three times more likely to attend top-ranked universities or liberal arts colleges.
Some parents of non-White children specifically mention access to good colleges when explaining their choice to send their children to independent schools (Bloots, et al., 2020). Given the low numbers of minority enrollment at most of these institutions, however, these students often have a hard road to navigate. Case studies point to several challenges: the colorblind mentality of faculty and students, a culture of politeness, and the lack of a clear definition of diversity (Arrington et al., 2003; Pérez del Toro, 2017).

Bonilla-Silva categorizes these challenges as “abstracted liberalism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 56). By using liberal references, he wrote, Whites can discuss inequality in language that makes them seem as if they are still taking the moral high ground. This allows them to “tiptoe around the most dangerous racial minefields because the stylistic elements of color blindness provide them the necessary tools to get in and out of almost any discussion” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 76). Wiltshire (2020) noted these tendencies in the faculty of her independent school. She begins her study by recounting a story in which a White teacher told the Black administrator, “I don’t see your color; you and I are the same” (Wiltshire, 2020, p. 1). Wiltshire employed targeted dialogue sessions to increase discussions around the topic and improve cultural competence among teachers. In a post-discussion survey, she asked the nine participants where they thought the faculty fell on a cultural competency scale. The most common response was the “between cultural blindness and cultural precompetence” (Wiltshire, 2020, p. 80), the lowest rating.

In 2017, Pérez del Toro studied diversity efforts at three California independent schools and found the same preference for this colorblind approach. She said a school’s hesitancy to talk about race reinforces the notion of colorblindness for students. She wrote, “The students seemed to lack an understanding that the school’s avoidance of race
and colorblind stance only works to reinforce the status quo and institutionalized racism” (Pérez del Toro, 2017, p. 131). When this colorblind approach is paired with a polite culture, conversations can really shut down. In a study of the success of African-American students in independent schools, Arrington (2003) and her colleagues noted:

As opposed to our previous work in public schools where resistance was more overt, and therefore easier to identify, in independent schools it seemed that there was a systematic “niceness” that masked the hesitancy of the schools to fully engage with the research. It took longer for the Penn team to read through this niceness and understand that while many of the people we encountered in the schools were pleasant to us and spoke encouragingly about our work, we were still not making the progress we had hoped. (The Story Behind the Research section)

In independent schools where teachers push forward with hard conversations, Pérez del Toro (2017) found that parent resistance is common. She interviewed one faculty member who noted this irony.

Discomfort means you’re not fully settled with something. If that means you have to think about it, explore your own complicities, or your own participation in anything, that’s okay. You’re not going to die from that kind of intellectual discomfort. It’s an important part of education. (Pérez del Toro, 2017, p. 135)

Still, complaints from tuition-paying parents can serve to pressure independent school faculty from pursuing hard conversations (French, 2018).
Some independent schools struggle with implementing initiatives related to diversity goals set forth by the national professional organization even though since 1996 NAIS has included equity and justice as part of its principles of good practice document (Brosnan, 2001). This document, which includes 21 areas from admissions to teaching and learning in the digital age, has changed over time to reflect a more intense commitment to diversity. It includes an administrative commitment to giving diversity personnel control over “key areas of policy development, including development, decision making, budget and management” (National Association of Independent Schools, 2023). In addition, NAIS sponsors an annual People of Color Conference and offers multiple tools to member institutions, such as the Assessment of Inclusivity and Multiculturalism survey. This survey gives schools the chance to take the temperature of school climate with important stakeholders.

A search of related diversity terms on the NAIS website also pulls up a plethora of articles about diversity initiatives and programs aimed at increasing minority enrollment and hiring, as well as strategies to help independent schools meet curricular diversity goals. Still, surveys show that independent schools are struggling in this area. In a 2019 diversity practitioner survey, respondents said while their school promotes a caring community, this is less well expressed in areas of diversity and inclusivity (NAIS, 2023). Diversity initiatives are most often reflected in school mission statements, but are less evident in other areas – including financial aid, which has declined over the last two years. While 50% of schools included diversity as part of their strategic plan in 2017, this fell to 46% in 2019. Only 22% of diversity practitioners indicated that diversity curriculum development was stressed at their schools.
In the last two years, French (2018) pointed to the difficulty independent schools have in defining diversity and finding meaningful ways to incorporate it into the curriculum. She wrote, “Far from issues of racial equality and access, the meaning of ‘diversity’ is ever-expanding and with each included group or issue attention to racial inequality is muted or diluted or simply gone” (French, 2018, p. 115). She cites school assemblies that highlight cultural celebrations, rather than rigorous courses that examine structural racism and inequity. Pérez del Toro (2017) found similar examples among the three schools she studied. Faculty members at one school went as far as including diversity of thought in their umbrella definition, which she subsequently categorized as “easy diversity” (Pérez del Toro, 2017, p. 125).

While definitions of diversity might be challenging for independent schools in general, one place where they are more easily interpreted is the independent school library, which can look to their history as well as current national standards to address these concepts.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Independent School Library**

Building a culturally responsive library collection means including books in which students can see themselves, while at the same time learning about other cultures. Librarians call this idea *mirrors and windows*, a term coined by Bishop (1990).

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human
experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Early efforts at inclusion by publishers, librarians, and authors began in the 1920s with Carter G. Woodson’s Associated Publishers, which sought to change the portrayal of Blacks in children’s literature (Salem, 2021). He was joined in this cause by Chicago librarian Charlemae Hill Rollins, who made sure children heard about important contributions by African Americans in story-time sessions. Fellow librarian Pura Belpré recognized the dearth of literature for Spanish-speaking children and worked to include Puerto Rican folklore through storytelling and puppet theater. In 1965 educator and writer Nancy Larrick noted that fewer than 7% of the books published in a two-year period included Black characters. By the next decade this statistic had increased to 14.4% and by the early 1980s the Cooperative Children’s Book Council at the University of Wisconsin-Madison had begun collecting data concerning Black authors and characters in children’s literature. This expanded to data on Indigenous people and other people of color in the 1990s (Salem, 2021).

Training for school librarians started to stress the need for diverse texts in the early 2000s (ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation Programs School Library Media Specialists, 2003). Over the last two decades, however, the call has become increasingly loud. The 2018 National Library Standards make “include” the first of its six shared foundations. The standards state the librarians should “include balanced and diverse perspectives, exhibit empathy and tolerance, and demonstrate a commitment to equity as
they build their own understandings” (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018, p. 57). Exposure to titles that align with these standards can help counteract or even reverse bias as it forms in young children (Husband, 2018). Such titles also help children develop empathy (Ishizuka, 2018). For minoritized groups they can be a lifeline. The positive portrayal of a student’s own culture can lead them to a greater appreciation for it (Iwai, 2015) as well as increased self-esteem (Husband, 2018). Among the majority population, multicultural titles can help dispel the myth that only the dominant culture is important (Short, 2018).

The type of diverse titles in the collection is also important. Including books that only focus on the historical pain of minority groups should be avoided (Stivers, et al., 2021). Websites such as We Need Diverse Books and The Brown Bookshelf, along with Twitter hashtags #blackboyjoy and #blackgirlmagic, direct readers to stories by Black authors who write about more than just a narrative of injustice. Librarian Julie Stivers and colleagues note the importance of these Black stories.

Simply put, who gets to tell stories — who controls the narrative — matters!

When authors have cultural and lived experiences that match those of their characters, the work has nuance and substance that can be seen and felt by the reader — especially when the reader has the same identity. (Stivers et al., 2021, p. 22)

Similar ideas about the importance of cultural references have held up in research spanning several decades. Ladson-Billings (1994) utilized a case study approach to investigate a Northern California school teaching low-income African-American and Mexican-American students. Ladson-Billings observed the classrooms of five African-American and three White teachers, who were chosen based on recommendations from
parents and administrators. After three years, she identified several characteristics of culturally responsive teachers and culturally responsive classrooms. Among these were that culturally responsive educators taught students how their everyday life and community fit into the larger picture of their country and world. These teachers also viewed their role as one that facilitated excellence within students by using their diversity and differences as learning tools. With these tools, “students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom [sic] and real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the official curriculum” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.126–127).

Running alongside the work of Ladson-Billings has been the research of Geneva Gay. In 2002 she called for teachers to utilize cultural scaffolding, which she defined as “using [students’] own cultures and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement” (Gay, 2002, p. 109). Citing Ladson-Billings and others, she noted that the academic achievement of minority students would improve when they were taught “through their own cultural and experiential filters” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Combining the work of Ladson-Billings and Gay into a framework of culturally relevant education (CRE), Aronson and Laughter (2016) sought to show that this pedagogy and these teaching practices were effective in the classroom. Their research was motivated by what Sleeter (2012) called a marginalization of the work due to the popularity of standardized curriculum resulting from neoliberalism. Reviewing more than 40 studies of CRE in math, science, history/social studies, English/language arts, and English as a second language, Aronson and Laughter (2016) found an increase in students’ academic skills and conceptual
understandings. Also of import was the positive impact CRE had on student motivation, interest, engagement, competence, and confidence in taking standardized tests.

While librarians can work to build culturally responsive library collections for students, it is equally important to involve students in the process. Showing them they have the power to change the status quo is a crucial step in creating empowered learners. This is the next theme I will discuss.

**African-American students and sociopolitical consciousness**

In creating a library curriculum that is more culturally responsive, librarians are teaching students to think critically, challenge the status quo, and take action — themes also present in culturally responsive pedagogy. Through a series of lessons, I will show students how to look for bias in children’s literature as well as to evaluate texts for bias, empathy, inclusion, and representation. This type of lesson can be done with any book, even with the youngest learners. For example, one elementary librarian examined gender stereotypes in the award-winning title, *We Forgot Brock* by Carter Goodrich. This book features two children with gender stereotypical imaginary friends (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018). Before they read the book, the class drew their own imaginary friends and discussed gender stereotypes. The activity gave students the necessary schema to critically examine the title when it was read to them. When the class finally heard the story, they were well prepared to identify critical themes within the book.

Ladson-Billings (1995) found that culturally responsive teachers equipped their students to think critically. She stated that “not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and
critique current social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). In Dreamkeepers (2009) she shared the story of one teacher who used a unique way to lead students down this path. After one of her students had left the room, this teacher sat at the empty desk claiming to have “discovered” it and all the items on it. She announced the desk and items were now hers, which prompted a conversation about how someone could claim to discover something that belonged to others. This eventually led to a discussion about European exploration. This teacher’s action sparked debate in the classroom by assuming an oppositional stance that “fostered the students’ confidence in challenging what may be inaccurate or problematic” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 102).

Effective library programs teach students to think critically. Understood in the standards is the idea that many students have been left out of meaningful library inquiry (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018). Instead, they have either been given meaningless tasks to learn how to navigate the library, or no voice in what they choose to investigate. As a result, librarians are now asked to empower students to make their own decisions and employ “inclusive inquiry [that] asks us to think about how we question representation” (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018, p. 58). That means teaching learners to examine texts, stories, and resources to see whose voices are missing. A diversity audit, therefore, supports this standard, the spirit of which is reflected in the abundant research on culturally responsive pedagogy.

Engaging in action is another important staple of library practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, and self-determination theory. One example comes from Librarian Teresa Lansford, who pointed to the deep sense of pride and confidence that developed when her students started to take on more meaningful projects.
This group of students hadn’t seen themselves in the past as having anything to contribute to our learning community and here they were with a valuable contribution to our learning. You could tell they felt more important in school than they had before. (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018, p. 61)

Giving my students the power to assess and purchase books for the school library hopes to accomplish this same goal: making our African-American fourth-grade students feel more empowered. I hope to do this by tapping into their intrinsic motivation, as outlined in Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory. I believe that taking action to sustain a diverse collection will be easier by creating a community of learners among our African-American students. A sense of belonging to the group and its mission will be essential for completing the task.

**African-American Students and Connection**

At Sedgefield Academy only 100 of the school’s more than 1,200 students identify as African American (Sedgefield Academy, 2023). This low enrollment number is the story at most independent schools in America, meaning that for this group of students, community is hard to find. In one study, 75% of Black students said they had to take extra measures to make themselves a part of the school community (Arrington et al., 2003). Researchers have noted, however, the importance of bonds within the school community. Ryan and Deci (2000) state that connections to classmates and teachers are significant contributors to whether students thrive or languish. Furthering this research, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) found that students who have these relationships are “more likely to exhibit identified and integrated regulation for the arduous tasks involved in learning, whereas those who feel disconnected or rejected by teachers are more likely to move away from
internalization and thus respond only to external contingencies and controls” (Niemiec & Ryan, p. 139-140).

Ladson-Billings (1995) also identified community-building as an important part of a successful classroom for Black students. A sense of belonging, along with psychological safety, are key components of a culturally responsive classroom. In her work observing classroom teachers, she wrote that relationships between students and teachers were key, and these often extended beyond the walls of the classroom. Examples from her work *Dreamkeepers* included a teacher who drilled into her students the concept of the classroom as family. Another took her students on a camping trip at the start of the school year to increase their cooperative skills. These activities embedded an understanding in students that they are responsible for each other and reflect the African cultural norm that individual identity cannot be separated from the group (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Librarians today also stress the importance of relationships. In the book, *Core Values in School Librarianship*, an entire chapter is related to relationships. The authors write that elementary school librarians often start the year reading books about identity, diversity, and community to set the stage for positive relationships for years to come (Sturge et al., 2021). The National Library Standards (American Association of School Librarians, 2021) also urge librarians to find creative ways to initiate collaborative strategies among students that go farther than just group work (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018). A diversity audit could be one such collaborative strategy that builds a sense of community among students (Stivers et al., 2021).

**Related Research**
Empirical evidence relating to the involvement of elementary students in diversity audits is difficult to find, but research involving older students is available. One such study involved the University of the Pacific, which hired eight student interns to work with an assistant dean and several librarians in examining the collection for themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Wells et al., 2022). The project looked at collection development through the lens of critical pedagogy and focused on three learning outcomes:

- Students will learn how library resources are acquired and catalogued.
- Students will learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in libraries, the context of specific disciplines, and in the publishing world.
- Students will develop critical thinking and information literacy skills by assessing materials in the library collection. (Wells et al., 2022, p. 338-339)

Students were involved in every aspect of the project, from selecting the methodology through final recommendations on collection development. The group of librarians and students met twice each month to discuss the project and read articles related to diversity, equity, and inclusion topics in libraries and publishing. Once the audit began, students examined books in the selected categories for author/editor’s gender, ethnicity, identity, and disability status. They looked at the cover art, as well as whether the book identified as anti-racist or contained social justice themes. For fiction titles they noted if the book included a main character who was BIPOC or LGBTQ+. Lastly, they noted the gender of the publishing company’s CEO.
Surveys took the pulse of students before, during, and after the project. The questionnaire included six open-ended queries, such as “How would you describe diversity, equity, and inclusion?” Three Likert-scale statements were asked as well, including “Diversity, equity, and inclusion are issues that matter when I select a book for my research and studies” (Wells et al., 2022). A comparison of the data showed that students had a superficial understanding of diversity issues before undertaking the project. By the end, however, they had grown both in their understanding and appreciation for the importance of the topic in libraries and publishing. Student reflections focused on the need to publicize the results of the audit and compare the results to other libraries, create a form for student book recommendations, revise the collection development policy, and seek out grants to purchase books from underrepresented demographics. Further reflection centered around the value of learning together as a group and the importance of having data that reflected the need for changes in the collection. One student said that discussing professional articles during periodic meetings was particularly valuable. Another wrote, “Although the work is tedious, and the results have so far reflected our original expectations, it is important to have the data to back up the claims” (Wells et al., 2022).

While the University of the Pacific’s diversity audit involved students in every part of the process, another college audit did so to a lesser extent (Emerson & Lehman, 2022). The Augustana College library trained students to conduct the audit, but used them mainly as a vehicle to complete the work. Only one staff member oversaw their efforts and was available to answer questions or concerns. They did not survey the students, involve them in the methodology, or focus on the effect the audit had on them. The library did, however, acknowledge that students should have an input into the collection development process.
They noted that college libraries should be “connecting directly with their students, campuses, and even the broader external community beyond their colleges and universities to ensure that they are seeking input from the people who know best what voices they need to see in the collections” (Emerson & Lehman, 2022, p. 10). After the audit was complete, the library added this goal to their collection development practices.

While not categorized as research studies, other articles that promote the need for diversity audits can be found on the blogs of many classroom teachers and librarians (Byram, 2022; Bogan, 2020). A blog about innovative education in Vermont featured elementary school librarian Becky Whitney, who led her students in a diversity audit called “Diversity Detectives” (Homan, 2019, third para.). Students could choose the topic they wanted to explore — gender representation, holidays, history, science, biography, or sports and hobbies. As they examined the library books, the students asked questions about whose stories might be missing from these categories. Whitney advised educators to treat the audit like any other assignment because it involves skills present in other disciplines: critical thinking, text analysis, and data analysis. She also cautioned against thinking that students are disinterested in this type of work.

It’s kind of like the whole goalkeeper thing too, when you say to them, “who’s going to solve this problem?” They’re like “us, we are, we’re going to solve this problem. We are the goalkeepers, we’re the game changers. We’re going to solve this problem.” I just think that they are — they’re really, they’re very aware of what is right and wrong. They are very passionate about justice. (Homan, 2019, section 6)
Whitney said that students can do an audit, even when they are young. With support, they can find biases in literature and evaluate who is missing from the narrative. A diversity audit “opens their eyes to systems of power in our society in clear ways and allows them to learn and then follow that up with action” (section 7).

Another way to approach the study of curricular intervention performed by elementary students, is to look at studies about student voice and choice in the classroom. As Ryan and Deci (2000) write, such involvement can increase the connection between students and the classroom. Using a framework including agency, belonging, competence, discourse, and efficacy, one study examined the efforts of a group of fifth graders to change the salad option in their school cafeteria (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). The current offering included meat, which could not be consumed by various religious and ethnic groups at the school. “The Salad Girls,” as they became affectionately known, went to a teacher, school principal, and cafeteria coordinator. The principal eventually helped them launch an inquiry-based project that would gather data to support their project. After presenting their information to the district-wide cafeteria manager, the school was awarded two more salad options on a trial basis. After hearing about their efforts, they received a visit from the state’s Secretary of Health.

Measuring the effect on “The Salad Girls,” researchers found they were more confident in their ability to change the status quo and that they felt that they had the right to ask for such change (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). The girls told researchers that working closely with teachers and students in the school increased their sense of belonging. They also reported an increase in their competence around collecting, analyzing, and presenting data, as well time management and public speaking. The school’s principal said the project
improved student discourse, as evidenced by the way the girls considered each other’s opinions and negotiated with each other. They also learned to effectively communicate with school administrators. Finally, research showed that the girls learned to recognize both the needs of other students and their responsibility to help them. While the project started out as one of self-interest, the girls quickly understood that their interests were aligned with their classmates. Taking action made them realize that they had the power to change things not only for themselves, but for many students.

Another study involving both fourth and fifth graders looked at the issue from a different perspective, measuring empowerment and school satisfaction in a test-centered environment where students had little freedom (Wasserberg, 2018). The first part of the project sought to determine the student experience at this low-performing school, in which 82% of the 420 students were African American. Questions centered around the school day, the nature of math and reading lessons, and how students felt about these lessons and their teachers. The second part required students to become the researchers, asking their classmates to define good and bad teachers, as well as exciting and boring lessons. Students were to use their data to create presentations to show teachers.

Findings showed that students liked when teachers deviated from test-centered instruction from workbooks and test preparation materials. Many longed for a more personal connection with teachers. One student said he preferred the classroom to be a “happy place where everyone would feel comfortable. It would be like a family even though everyone can see that we aren’t really their kids” (Wasserberg, 2018, p. 187). Students said they liked it when teachers gave them individual help and felt they would be
more engaged, confident, and happy if this happened more often. They also showed a preference for teachers speaking to them privately when correcting a behavior.

The peer-to-peer interviews in Wasserberg’s (2018) project allowed student researchers to experience a feeling of control over their situation. All reported a sense of empowerment from being able to gather data and report on their findings. Giving recommendations to teachers flipped the student-teacher experience, and students played an active role in these critical conversations. It provided a model of how to improve student engagement in a school that valued high-stakes testing.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have sought to review the research related to my problem of practice — the isolation and discomfort felt by African-American students who do not identify with the curriculum taught at their predominantly White, independent school. To investigate the problem, I ask how involving them in a library diversity audit might affect them. I also ask what changes they would make to the book collection to make it more culturally responsive to them. Breaking apart the problem and research questions, I looked for published research about African Americans at independent schools, culturally relevant teaching, library diversity audits, student voice and choice, and student belonging. I placed my investigation within the frameworks of culturally sustaining pedagogy and self-determination theory, which allowed me to develop themes pertaining to my study. This conceptual framework consisted of the lack of representation and resources for African-American students at independent schools, culturally relevant pedagogy in the independent school library, and the need for African-American students to learn about their lives and act
on that information. Finally, I researched voice and choice and how it empowers students and leads to a sense of belonging.

The research on my proposed intervention – a diversity audit performed in an elementary school library – is scarce, so this topic should fill a significant void in the literature. Given the plethora of blogs and articles emphasizing the importance of diversity audits to underrepresented students, this research should prove helpful to many school librarians. Set in the frameworks of self-determination theory and culturally responsive pedagogy, I hope educational practitioners will see the value of using student-involved diversity audits increase the well-being of minority students in predominantly White spaces.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

The previous chapter discussed the literature related to this action research project and the theories that frame it. This chapter will outline the research methods, including the study’s design and proposed intervention. Further, it will detail the selection of participants, as well as the data collection methods employed and subsequent analysis.

Problem of Practice

Sedgefield Academy has spent the last two decades trying to recruit diverse students to its historically White campus. Non-White school enrollment now stands at 40%, with Asian-American students comprising the largest subgroup. African-American students make up only 8% — just a 1½- point increase over the last two decades. In addition to being few in number, parents of some African-American students say their students face many challenges at the school. One of these is a racially biased learning environment where students do not see themselves in the curriculum. The purpose of this study is to investigate if involving students in curricular decisions can create a more culturally responsive environment for them. While they attempt to create a more diverse library collection, I also hope to determine whether giving them autonomy can build confidence and increase their sense of school belonging. This study asks: How might the library curriculum become more culturally responsive to its African-American students if they are allowed to develop, supplement, and refine it? Also, does taking the action to de-
center Whiteness at the school increase their sense of belonging? Further, what changes would they make to the library collection?

These questions will be investigated through the frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and self-determination theory. Culturally responsive was developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), who decades ago pushed back against the deficit approaches used to teach African-American students. Instead of being forced into the educational mainstream, she wrote, students deserve a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) that “addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.469). Paris (2012) added to this work by calling for a culturally sustaining pedagogy, which added the components of power and agency. He wrote that educators must be willing to critically examine CRP to ensure that it remains transformative.

Self-determination theory investigates motivation and the favors that affect it (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Specifically, it states that students will thrive if their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. In a school setting this means that students are given a choice of what they do and a voice in how they do it. They are made to feel competent in their abilities to perform required activities. Finally, they have significant relationships that make them feel part of the school community.

Overview of Chapter

I will start by placing this study within the confines of qualitative action research and social justice. I will introduce the fourth-grade students involved and the library setting where the intervention takes place. The permission process involving students, the school,
and the university will be also be outlined. The data collection section details the five sources from which I mined information for this project. They are recounted in the order they were conducted – an engagement survey, the first round of oral interviews, the diversity audit intervention, the second round of interviews, and the culturally sustaining library walk. I will explain the nature of the interviews, as well as the lesson plans used in the diversity audit intervention with students. I will then discuss data analysis and the methods used to ensure internal and external validity of the results. A summary paragraph will bring together the purpose, methods, and analysis of the study.

**Research Design**

This project is categorized as action research because it seeks to solve a problem of practice, is emergent in design, engages participants in the process of discovery, and involves the collection and analyses of research in a systematic way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, it is a qualitative study, specifically a case study, because it studies “the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 29). Schools are ideal environments for this type of research because they are ready-made groupings with their own distinct cultures. Because this study deals with power dynamics, it is classified as a critical action research. Overall, it will address who has access to the curriculum, who can change the curriculum, and what outcomes the curriculum produces. Critical case studies hope to “raise questions about how power relations advance the interests of one group while oppressing those of other groups, and about the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61).
The power structure in question in this study is that of Sedgefield Academy, an independent school located in the Southeastern United States. For most of its 90-year history, Sedgefield has enrolled an overwhelmingly White student body. Moreover, the school is part of the National Association of Independent Schools, a 1,272-member organization in which more than half of students identify as White (National Association of Independent Schools, 2023).

**Research Setting, Sample, Participants**

The intervention proposed in this case study was a student-led diversity audit of school library materials. Jensen (2018) refers to this action as a method of determining how much of the collection “reflects something other than the experiences of straight, White, and non-disabled males, and to fill the gaps” (Jensen, 2018, para.1). Students judged the extent to which library materials reflect themes of anti-bias, empathy, inclusivity, and representation.

Research for this project took place in Sedgefield Academy’s Lower School Library, which serves about 400 students in grades PK-4. On a typical day the library hosts three to four classes and many more students who have come to check out books. Both events happen simultaneously, with children browsing the shelves while the librarian reads stories or teaches various information literacy skills. The library operates on a flexible schedule, which allows students to check out books any time during the day and teachers to schedule classes with the librarian at their convenience. This type of scheduling demonstrates the library’s philosophy that the space and resources should be always accessible to faculty and students.
The library contains more than 15,500 books, the selection of which is my sole responsibility. When purchasing books, I consult reviews published by leading trade journals, including *School Library Journal* and *Horn Book Magazine*, as well as websites and social media sites that feature titles about diverse groups, such as *We Need Diverse Books* and the conscious kid. I also purchase books that have won awards from library organizations. Additionally, student and teacher requests are also important when selecting new books.

Because fourth-grade students are the oldest students in the division, they are the best equipped to understand issues around diversity themes. They are also able to read the widest array of library materials — a requirement for assessing these resources. As the oldest learners, they have also had more practice at working in groups, debating, and articulating their points of view to others.

Parents gave permission via email for their students to participate in the study. Using non-probability, purposeful sampling, I asked all six African-American students in the fourth grade to participate. This type of sampling is used when the researcher needs to examine those who know the most about the problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Five of the students initially agreed, but one withdrew a month into the study. The student said they dropped out because they thought the library did not need any improvement. Comments written on her engagement survey, however, indicated she was having issues with another student in the group. Because research participants were under the age of 12, I asked for their consent orally. Pseudonyms were used for all students and for the school itself. Additionally, I sought and received permission to conduct the study from both our
school’s Director of Diversity, Equity, and Engagement and the University of South Carolina’s Institutional Review Board.

**Data Collection**

The first segment of data collection began with the Communities in Schools (2020) Elementary Student Engagement Survey, the aim of which was to see how connected students felt to the school. The Likert-scale survey measured four types of engagement: emotional, social, behavioral, and cognitive. The section on emotional engagement, which measured school belonging, asked students to rate their agreement with the statement, “I feel like I am a part of my school,” and “My teacher’s lessons include stories and activities that talk about people like me or my family.” The social engagement section, which measured a student’s connection to teachers and other students, included the statements, “There is an adult at my school I can talk to when I’m upset,” as well as “I regularly talk to/connect with friends from school.” The statements about behavioral engagement, which relates to involvement in school activities, included “When I can, I join in/take part in class activities,” and “I try hard to do well in school.” The final section, which asked students to rate the statements, “School is important to me,” and “I like learning new things in school,” measured cognitive engagement, or interest in the curriculum.

The first phase of oral interviews consisted of 10 questions for individual students (See Appendix A). I met with each in a relaxed setting to further develop rapport and ensure each student was comfortable with the project. The first two questions sought to determine information about length of attendance and siblings present at school. Questions three through five asked students to describe their school experience, likes and dislikes, as well as how they would describe the school to outsiders. The next three
questions dealt with the connection students felt to the school, including friendships and the home-school connection. The final two questions concerned curriculum and any proposed changes to it or the school in general. Many of the questions allowed me to follow up on the engagement survey to further probe levels of belonging. I felt such information would be helpful to measure the full impact of the diversity audit intervention, especially if the students were disengaged.

After each individual interview, students participated in a focus group meeting. These meetings had a two-fold purpose: to create a “research community” early in the process and to allow students to be able to hear each other’s opinions. The first was important because not all the students were in the same class, so I wanted to give them time to gel as a group. The second allowed each member to compare their feelings to those of their classmates and respond in real time. I thought the meeting could create interactive discussions and generate data that could not otherwise have been gathered. (Hennink, 2014).

For some, it was clearly the first time they had been together in this way. Although things started slowly at first, once the first student chimed in, conversation began to flow. Questions in this session further probed the findings from individual interviews. Only one new question was added, asking participants to offer suggestions about how the school could make them feel more welcome.

Before conducting the audit, students participated in targeted lessons on how themes of bias, empathy, inclusivity, and representation show up in children’s literature. These lessons started by reading two books, A Kids Book About Belonging (Carroll, 2019) and The Invisible Boy (Ludwig & Barton, 2013). Discussion centered around what it means to
belong. Students were asked to think about times they felt left out and how they coped. They spoke about the harmful effects of adopting a façade to fit in, as well as the importance loving themselves. Students debated strategies about how to be more inclusive in the classroom.

After discussion concluded, I began the diversity audit presentation. I offered the definitions of both diversity and audit, as well as the mission of the Lower School Library and the role librarians play in supporting that mission. Next came a discussion of publishing trends in the world of children’s books. This centered around the idea that most children’s books include White characters (SLJ Staff, 2019). In fact, 77% of the books published in 2018 were stories about White characters or books about animals or inanimate objects (trucks, etc.). Books about African Americans, Asians, Latinx, and Native Americans made up only 4.2% combined.

The presentation also examined historical data, noting that percentages before 2018 were significantly lower in terms of diversity (SLJ Staff, 2019). In 2015, 85.5% of published books featured White characters or animals/trucks, etc. Keeping these statistics in mind, I asked students to consider the cumulative effect of books publishing over the last 100 years. That led to their understanding that the nation’s libraries are filled with stories containing a White narrative. This discussion was followed by a video from the We Need Diverse Books movement, a non-profit organization that promotes diverse literature. The video featured authors speaking about the importance of diverse literature in their childhoods.

Once the need for diverse literature had been established, students started examining titles that had been controversial due to their perceived insensitivity. These books included,
Little House on the Prairie (Wilder, 1971), due to its portrayal of Native Americans; A Fine Dessert (Jenkins, 2015), for its portrayal of enslaved people; The Five Chinese Brothers (Bishop, 1996) and Alvin Ho (Look, 2009), for stereotypical illustrations of Asians; and Goggles (Keats, 1998) a Black narrative written by a White author. The latter title led to a discussion about most authors being White. Only 235 of the 4,075 books published in 2019 were written by people of color (Children’s Book Cooperative, 2023). These conversations allowed students to consider what they should look for while performing the audit on the Lower School collection. Ultimately, the list was narrowed to race of author, publication year, as well as the race, gender, religion, and ability of the main characters. Students would eventually note these on an electronic form they would submit to me (See Appendix B).

Once I felt students had a grasp of the objective, they started the audit. All four classes of fourth grade students participated, but observations and data were only retained from the four African-American students in the research project. Students worked in pairs and were assigned specific shelves of the picture book section to assess. I chose picture books because their length and format would allow students to examine a good number of titles. I wanted to give each pair enough practice so that they could internalize their thinking. The hope was that this type of critique might become automatic when they opened picture books in the future.

Time was also a factor in deciding how much of the collection to audit. Teachers were only able to sign up for four classes due to time constraints. My plan, therefore, was to have students perform a randomized sample audit and extrapolate the data across the
picture book collection. I have done this many times in the library to get as a snapshot of certain criteria, like the age of the collection.

After students viewed the results of the audit, I asked them to choose 10 new books from the website Diverse BookFinder. Since 2002, this organization has worked to compile a database of picture books featuring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The search engine on the website allows for queries by subject, ethnicity, awards, settings, content, genres, tribal affiliation/homelands, race/culture, immigration, gender, religion, and character prominence. I directed fourth graders to the race/culture category and asked them to choose from the following headings: Asian/Pacific Islander/Asian American, Bi/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Black/African/African American, Brown-Skinned and/or Race Unspecified, First/Native Nations/American Indian/Indigenous, Latinx/Hispanic/Latin American, Middle Eastern/North African/Arab, and Multi-racial Cast of Characters. Students were asked to check the Sedgefield Academy’s catalog to see if the library owned a copy before making a recommendation for purchase. In addition to the ten titles offered by each fourth grader, African-American students took a field trip to an all-Black book store in the city. They browsed books, selected their favorites, and checked to see if the library owned a copy before giving them to me to purchase.

Post-audit activities included a final round of individual interviews and a focus group meeting. This time, interview questions focused specifically on the audit, as well as selecting books from the Diverse BookFinder and the African-American bookstore. I was interested in determining how giving students decision-making authority made them feel, as well as whether they would like to see similar activities in other curricular areas. These
answers would help determine whether they felt a tighter connection to the school since participating in the audit.

A culturally sustaining library walk concluded the study. This activity is usually conducted by a mix of participants — administrators, teachers, parents, and students — and measures the cultural responsiveness of the library program to its diverse students (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2004). I, however, wanted to give students another chance to be the sole decision-makers. I asked them only two questions: “What do you like about the space?” and “What would you change about the space if you could?”

**Data Analysis and Strategies**

Researchers ensure data reliability by being flexible and responsive to fluid situations and new information. I reviewed the data for this research project and analyzed it at the completion of each session, so that new leads and ideas could be pursued as they arose. For instance, once the engagement survey was completed, I calculated and examined results, then tweaked the first round of oral interview questions based on what I had found. Similarly, I studied the answers to the interview questions before formulating and conducting the focus group questions. This simultaneous method of collecting and analyzing data is the preferred method in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Without such a strategy, the data can be overwhelming.

Rigorous data collection means making sure that information is believable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethnography uses four specific strategies to ensure credibility. Researchers in this field spend a great deal of time with their participants, gather data through the concrete tool of interviewing, observe participants in a natural setting, and
reflect heavily on their role in each part of the research process. I relied on each of these four tools throughout this study.

First, I spent several hours over the course of three months with each student. After each session with them, I wrote copious notes, remarking on both verbal and non-verbal cues. My notes included reflections, questions, problems, solutions, and new ideas, along with interactions. I also thought about what the data indicated at that point in the project. During audit observations I noted conversations between partners, questions that arose, and the engagement level of each participant. I made alterations in the event of absences and intervened if situations ran into unforeseen difficulty.

I also wanted my research to be transferable to similar situations. I did this by using thick description in three areas. First, I described the culture of independent schools. Second, I described the atmosphere and dynamics of Sedgefield Academy. Third, I described the library space. Throughout the process, I ensured that my notations allowed for my eventual findings to be detailed enough for a reader to determine whether the results are likely to apply to their situation.

I also thought a great deal about my positionality. I determined that I had an emic (insider) perspective and was an observer as participant (Gold, 2017). This position allowed me to have an insider role to the activities performed by the student groups (Adler & Adler, 1994). Because this study included critical research, I was also concerned about an additional layer of influence — the power I have over students. By the time most of these students entered fourth grade, I had been their librarian for four to six years (depending on whether they attended Preschool at Sedgefield Academy). I had more than a cursory relationship and good rapport with them, as the library plays a large part in the instructional
life of the school. I also considered how my identity as a White, female, middle class, cisgender teacher positioned me in a study about how a curricular intervention might affect belonging among minority students. In particular, I needed to put aside my feelings about the selection of books in my collection, which I have overseen for the past 20 years. I had to come to terms with the idea that choosing books puts me in a position of privilege, as Koester (2015) states.

A major aspect of this topic is selection/collection development, and the fact that selection is a privilege. If you select materials for your readers, you are privileged to get to influence not only what children read, but what they have access to in the first place. (para. 12)

Allowing students to weed and purchase books for a library collection — a step rarely taken in elementary schools — could only work if I truly stepped back and relinquished control. Otherwise, the implicit bias I brought to the table could show up once again.

Another helpful tool for my research was the incorporation of two critical friends. These co-workers served as a “vital sounding board, to help [me] step back or out of the research enough to more thoroughly understand what it is [I] am seeing and doing” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 99). In several cases they helped me to stay true to the mission of the research and not be influenced by personal feelings. Sometimes it was hard to hear what students thought of representation in the library collection. Additionally, it was often hard not to question the perceptions of students. But these external advisors reminded me that it was important to base the findings on student beliefs, not my opinion of their beliefs (Herr & Anderson, 2015).
The ultimate goal of the research was to find commonalities — or categories — that emerged across the data sets once they were transcribed. First, it was helpful to physically lay out the materials in the order they were collected. I then began to analyze the 10 oral interviews, using open coding and sorting the data into themes based on the use of keywords, phrases, and ideas. As I moved from an inductive to deductive process, I began to realize what the data were really telling me. The themes and categories upon which I settled met five benchmarks. They were: responsive to the purpose of the research; exhaustive; mutually exclusive; specific; and conceptually congruent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Summary

This ethnographic case study examined whether giving African-American students the autonomy to make curricular decisions made the Sedgefield Lower School Library more culturally responsive to them. It also investigated whether this activity increased their sense of belonging at school. Because several studies (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2006; Arrington & Stevenson, 2006; French, 2018) have documented this sense of detachment among Black students at independent schools, this research has the potential to help students who are in similar situations. Through surveys, observations, focus groups, and individual student interviews, I hoped to see how the tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy and self-determination theory played out in my library setting. Did having the power to assess books for bias and select more inclusive titles help students become empowered members of the Sedgefield community? Was this enough to counter the effects of attending a school where their skin color is different than most of their classmates?
I hoped to answer these questions through a qualitative action research project that ethically accounts for my inherent bias as a White, female, cisgender investigator. Through a rigorous analysis of data collected in five stages, I hoped to find ways to center the Black experience in an independent school library setting. I hoped to “get it right” and “make it meaningful” (Greene, 1992, p. 39, as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015).
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Overview of Study

This research project sought to find out what one group of African-American students could tell us about decentering Whiteness in their school lives. Many Black parents at this Southern U.S. independent school complain that the school’s curriculum does nothing to help this process and that its adherence to a White standard of excellence affects these students negatively. They claim that having a more culturally relevant curriculum will allow their students to thrive in a predominantly White space.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000) students need to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness to reach their full academic potential. For students from minoritized groups, including African Americans, pedagogy that is culturally relevant to their lives is an effective strategy to bring these three goals to fruition (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Further, when this pedagogy is sustained through ideas that continue to test and support it, it can become an effective curricular tool (Paris, 2012). Using these theoretical frameworks this study seeks to investigate how to improve the school lives of African-American students at Sedgefield Academy.

Specifically, this study asks “How might involving African-American students in an activity that decenters Whiteness affect their feelings about attending a predominantly White school? Further, what changes would they suggest to the library curriculum after participating in this activity?
Where The Journey Began

My deep dive into diversity work at Sedgefield Academy was prompted by sheer frustration. When I first came to the school with my children, I loved the progressive stance toward diversity and inclusion expressed in the school’s mission statement. Soon after I started working there, however, I noticed that we were saying and doing the same things year after year, with little to no effect on certain underrepresented groups of students. For instance, the population of south and east Asian students was increasing, yet the number of Black students remained about the same.

Professional development also stalled. The third time I participated in a “walk of privilege,” an activity where participants are asked to move forward every time they have received some type of societal benefit, I was fed up. When were we ever going to go deeper into the work? How were we going to grow?

Adding to my frustration was the type of diversity work we were doing with students. Each year we prepared a MLK event, which was under the direction of our division’s diversity coordinators. We also held holiday assemblies, featuring dance, food, dress, as well as information about cultural heroes. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) describe these activities as trivial and Hammond (2018) labels them as surface culture as opposed to shallow culture (the unspoken social rules that govern how we act) and deep culture (how we learn, as well as how we interpret our environment). French (2018), who grew up attending independent schools and has studied diversity programs in independent schools in the Northeast, writes that these predominantly White schools have perfected the “special events version of diversity work” (French, 2018, p. 70). Boy, have we ever.
The school eventually hired a director of diversity, but the job was part-time. It was given to an admissions employee, who had no background in curriculum development and a plethora of other responsibilities. We brought in various speakers. We talked about needing to improve. Time continued to drag on.

Then came the shooting of George Floyd in May of 2020. Faculty began to mobilize. They demanded that the school become more accountable for its diversity initiatives. Many started reading books, including Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) *White Fragility*, after which they formed White anti-racist groups and began to examine their identities to hunt for inner prejudice and implicit bias. Things finally seemed to be moving forward.

I also felt the momentum in the library world. Equity was front and center in the most recent version of the National Library Standards (2018), which “challenge [librarians] to embrace the systemic value of diversity as [they] work to remedy structural barriers to equity” (Lechtenberg & Phillips, 2018, p. 57). New standards set six shared foundations for work with students: inquiry, inclusion, collaboration, curation, exploration, and engagement.

With all these forces at work, I knew it was time to start the project I had always envisioned. I wanted to investigate the experience of Black students — a racial group that is significantly underrepresented even though it makes up 37% of our city’s population. I wanted to know how these students felt, what they thought, and how we could make our curriculum more responsive to them.
I decided to interview fourth-grade African-American students at Sedgefield Academy to see how they viewed life at the school, particularly the curriculum of the Lower School Library. What did they think about our collection? Were they represented on the library shelves? Did they feel welcome when they walked through the doors?

Four of the six African-American fourth-grade students participated in the full project over a two-month period from late March to late May. Three of the students were female and one was male. The original group consisted of five students, but one dropped out midway through. Each student was given a pseudonym for data reporting purposes: Wade, Xena, Yvette, and Zelda. Wade and Yvette were the most outspoken members of the group. Wade, a very personable young man, is one of only two African-American males in the fourth grade. He is articulate and holds strong opinions about how Black students are perceived at Sedgefield. Yvette seemed excited to share her experiences at Sedgefield and talked at length about the pros and cons of being one of a few African-American students at an independent school. Xena and Zelda were quieter when being interviewed, and it took more for me to elicit information from them. Xena seemed to enjoy the camaraderie of the group and was more forthcoming when the students were together. Zelda was true to her quiet nature throughout the project.

As outlined in Chapter 3, data were collected in five stages: an initial engagement survey, a first phase of oral interviews, researcher observations and survey data from the diversity audit intervention, a second phase of oral interviews, and a group discussion after a library walk-through. Given the criticism by parents that Black and African-American students suffered from a lack of engagement due to Sedgefield policies, I
thought it important to establish a baseline level of student engagement before we began the interviews. Further, it is helpful to see where student scores fell within the different types of engagement. The latter answers the question, “In what types of activities are students most engaged?” Or perhaps more importantly, stated conversely, “In what types of activities are students disengaged?”

The Communities in Schools (CIS) Survey (Communities in Schools Inc, 2020) was given to five students in late March. Four students took the survey together, and one student took it on a different day due to absence. One student dropped out of the study mid-way through the project, so her survey was ultimately excluded.

Results in Table 1 indicate that behavioral engagement, which measures a student’s level of participation or involvement in school, was the most significant type of engagement for each student. Social engagement, measuring the connection with teachers and other adults, as well as cognitive engagement, measuring involvement and excitement about the curriculum, were found in equal measure among students. Emotional engagement, which measures school belonging, was the least evident type of engagement.

Once student interviews began, I noticed some inconsistencies between the answers to my questions and responses to the CIS survey questions. To ensure the survey reflected their true feelings, I asked group members to retake the survey with me reading the questions to them. It was clear from a few audible comments that at least one student had given the opposite response to what they had intended on a few of the questions. For instance, one student had offered positive associations with their effort and school work
during the interview, but had chosen negative responses on related survey questions. Most student answers, however, remained unchanged.

To analyze the results of the CIS survey, its creators suggest noting scores that fall on the high and low ends of a four-point scale (Communities in Schools Inc, 2020). CIS defines higher scores as equal or greater than 3.5 and lower scores as equal or less than 1.5. Under these parameters, the engagement levels of the four Sedgefield Academy students do not prompt any significant concern. Interestingly, school belonging ranked the lowest among the types of engagement measured, but its average rating of 2.75 is not considered low by CIS. Further, the global score, which is an average of all the individual average scores, measured 3.34. As such, this borders on the higher level.

**TABLE 4.1**
Communities In Schools Engagement Level Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT ENGAGEMENT LEVELS</th>
<th>STUDENT W</th>
<th>STUDENT X</th>
<th>STUDENT Y</th>
<th>STUDENT Z</th>
<th>Average All Students</th>
</tr>
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<td>EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.75</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4125</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT</td>
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<td>3.66</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.4125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 4.2**
Student Engagement Scores with Averages
Once a base-line level of engagement was established, I could move on to interviewing students. Although the intervention for this study concerned the library curriculum and how taking a role in changing it would affect African-American student belonging at the school, I realized that my book collection does not exist in a vacuum. What these students think about the library curriculum is intertwined with their feelings about the school. Further, how they feel about school is directly related to being one of the few African-American students in a predominantly White space. The questions I selected, therefore, were designed to probe all these areas. These students come into the library - and to this project - with complicated emotions from a variety of school experiences. I needed to see the big picture to understand how it affected the smaller one.

After analyzing the collected data, several prevalent themes emerged. I will outline these, placing them under the larger umbrella of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) three categories: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Running alongside this theoretical framework, however, is that of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, which focuses on student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Hammond (2015) posits that while these two frameworks are usually discussed separately, they are tightly connected and work together to create success in the classroom. Rather than discussing them separately, therefore, I have chosen to talk about the culturally responsive pedagogical tool used in this study – the diversity audit – under Ryan and Deci’s categories.
Relatedness

When speaking to these fourth-grade students, one theme came through loud and clear: It is difficult for Black students to relate to members of the school community when there are few teachers and students who look like them.

**Theme 1: We need more people who look like us**

“There aren’t many colors here,” Zelda said. “There are some colors, but a few colors are missing.” The connection to other students is vital, according to Hammond (2015). The brain naturally tries to avoid threats and seek out relationships that are beneficial. These positive interactions allow students to achieve maximum engagement by remaining relaxed and alert. But having few students with whom one can identify works against this neurological premise.

Xena said that being one of the only Black students in the school made her feel “weird.” Yvette agreed and said that recruiting more diverse students would go a long way in helping Black students feel they belong at Sedgefield.

I want kids to know that when they come here that they can know that it is a safe place. Like I already know that it’s a safe place. But I know there are a lot of people who will come here and be like, “Oh my gosh, there are so many White kids. I’m scared.” Or, “I’m not used to this. And I don’t want them to be like me when I first came here. My PreK had so many kids who looked like me. But on my first day of kindergarten here, I ran into the room and just screamed and cried and ran back out to my mom. And it took so long for me to go back in that classroom.
Yvette said she also tires of being asked to explain her culture to White members of the school community. She specifically mentioned her hair. Having more Black students or teachers around to say, “Hey, I like your new weave,” would be preferable, she said, to a plethora of hair extensions questions, for which she does not have the answers. She added that in her final year of the Lower School, she had hoped that she would have more teachers with whom she could connect.

Wade attributed some of his conflicts with classmates to the majority White student population. He said, “[White students] just aren’t used to having Black people around. They probably wish we were still slaves.” When asked why he believed this, he responded, “Sometimes people be like, ‘Wade, you’re so mean, I’m so scared of you.’ Or they’ll say, ‘You’re so annoying, I’m so scared of you. You’re so big. You’re so scary. You’re so black.’” Notably, none of the female participants mentioned similar interactions, but three of the four did report friendship issues with classmates. When probed further, they said that while some may be racial, this was not the first thing they thought when conflict arose.

The group also thought that having more Black students would prevent isolating experiences. Xena said, “They try to put, like, all the African Americans together, but sometimes it doesn’t always work out.” Wade continued:

Almost every year there’s probably one class that has three of four Black people and the rest have none, or one or two. Like I’m not saying you need to overload the school with Black people, you know, just try to get a little more diverse. Being the only Black student in the class can be a lot of pressure, because you don’t have anyone with who to identify. When you
have another you — or somebody you can connect with in your class on a
day-to-day basis, it just feels good. Like if you mess up, somebody will be
there — somebody to help you a little bit because now they feel that same
way. And, like, it feels weird when [the teacher] starts talking about Black
people and everybody just turns back and stares at you.

These vignettes clearly indicate that being one of only a few Black students in a
predominantly white space is challenging at best.

**Theme 2: There’s a lot of talk about White people**

When discussing the scope and sequence of the Lower School curriculum,
students could not remember exactly when they first encountered information about the
African-American experience. What they did note, however, was that it was always in
relation to history. Another comment widely repeated was that such instruction usually
occurred during the month of February (Black History Month) and almost always
involved Martin Luther King Jr.

Wade said this limited knowledge can lead White students to belittle Black
contributions. “I feel like younger kids that are White, European or whatever, whenever
they hear about Martin Luther King they’re like, ‘Oh Martin Luther King, he’s the only
good Black person.’ Or ‘Oh, I don’t like Martin Luther King because he’s the reason why
all of these Black people are in our school.’”

Yvette expressed disappointment that Black History month occurred in February.
“They had to choose the shortest month of the year,” she said. And Xena talked about her
great relief in learning this year that Martin Luther King Jr. was not the only one involved
in civil rights work. Of Bayard Rustin and his efforts in the 1963 March on Washington, she said, “I just knew there had to be some other person! But I just didn’t know who.”

Wade said that White students might respect Black students more if lessons about Black people were introduced earlier in the curriculum. He said his fourth-grade teacher did a good job of including all races in his lessons, but that had not been the case throughout the Lower School.

Mr. Mulrooney does a great job teaching about other cultures, instead of just, you know, European or White. But back, like, I will say, in second and third grade, they didn’t really show a lot of variety of color, which is why I think that White or Europeans think that they could personally be mean to Black kids — because they really don’t know a lot about them or what they’ve been through.

As for the library curriculum, three of the four students said there could be more diversity in the collection. They disagreed, however, as to the extent of the need. Wade said he visits the library frequently but rarely sees books that are relevant to his life or book covers.

Yeah, it’s not that common to walk down the aisle, look to your left [and say], ‘Oh wow, I see a black person on the cover’ or ‘I see a Mexican person on the cover’ or anything like that. Most of the covers or most of the books are about Europeans or Whites instead of Latinas, Blacks, Mexicans.

Xena said that while she feels the library does a good job acquiring diverse titles, librarians could do better.
Well, I know that you guys try really hard to fit in different cultures, and I
think you do a really good job with that. But I feel like there might be,
like, a little bit more kind of books that show, like, other cultures.

Yvette said she feels the library offers diverse options, but pointed specially to a
lack of representation in her favorite section - graphic novels. She suggested a few titles
featuring Black characters for the library to purchase, but she said it was important to
feature a diversity of interests as well.

I know that a lot of people like cats here. But I want people to know that
there’s also a book about a girl who likes dogs. And I think that it is good
for someone, like, not only to see their skin color, but also to see what else
they like other than just their skin.”

Zelda said initially that she felt the library has plenty of titles that fit her needs.

In discussing this difference between Wade’s assessment and the others, the group
decided that the discrepancy might be attributable to their varied interests, which would
prompt them to examine different sections. “I always go to the sports section,” Wade
noted, while Zelda added, “I like the Fantasy books.” Xena and Yvette, as mentioned
above, said they enjoyed graphic novels.

Overall, the students agreed that the school’s curriculum mainly focuses on White
people. Even when talking about oppression, Yvette noted, White people are still the
“main characters.”

I just feel like it’s frustrating because sometimes, you know how every
day there’s one thing that we have to do that has to include the White
people. Like the White people put the Black people in slavery; the White
people were in the Lost Colony; the White people did all this stuff. But
they don’t really tell us what we did wrong. Black people can sometimes
be the enemy, but we never talk about that.

It is interesting to note that the desire to talk about Black people in the curriculum is so
strong for this student, that she even wants to hear stories of when African-Americans
were the oppressors. I believe she is beginning her critical thinking journey into why
White people have historically held the power.

**Competence**

Even though research participants wanted more Black teachers and students at
Sedgefield and more of a reflection of their lives in the curriculum, each reported a strong
connection to the school. While they knew they faced certain obstacles, they all
expressed confidence in their ability to succeed an independent school. Each had
developed skills and strategies — although they did not label them as such — that
enabled their social and academic success.

**Theme 3: We feel at home here**

“It’s a great place to learn and connect with people,” Xena said. “And I think I
have a lot of friends, probably. And like I have very good friends, too.” When I asked her
how she goes about making these connections with other students she answered, “If
you’re nice then other people will be nice to you. I mean, like, not everyone will be nice
to you, but a lot of people will be nice to you if you’re nice to them.”

Both Wade and Zelda said they follow the mantra: be yourself. “You don’t have
to be someone else and think that someone’s gonna like you more just because you’re
[acting like] someone else,” Zelda commented. Wade advised, “Don’t act like a whole
different person. Because sooner or later, your true colors will really show. And also, you know, if there’s somebody that you see being mean to people, you know, just don’t be around them and be your own person.”

Yvette described Sedgefield as a “home that I never want to leave.” She expressed a strong belief in the teachers and the quality of education at Sedgefield. “If I didn’t have a school like this, I wouldn’t have a lot of the things I do today. And I wouldn’t be, like, that dedicated to stuff I do today. And I wouldn’t have the kinds of friends I do today. So I think that it is really good for me.”

Zelda also mentioned the quality of teachers and the available activities. “The teachers are very nice and the whole building is a warm community. If you go downstairs in the PreK, they open up the door for you and say, ‘Hi, how’s your day?’ And then if you go upstairs, they still say, ‘How’s your day?’” She added that she enjoyed grade level field trips and division-wide events, like the school’s annual Field Day and Unity Day, a day devoted to service projects and community building.

Wade described the school climate as producing a good learning experience. “You get exposed to new things. Get to go to new places. Get to learn a lot of new things that other schools don’t get to learn.” When asked whether the learning atmosphere makes up for a lack of diversity here, he commented that “the good outweighs the bad.”

Each of the research participants also had relatives who either are attending or had attended Sedgefield. Two of the participants said this fact made a huge difference in framing how they felt about the school. Yvette said, “I loved Kindergarten. I think that it was really a wonderful year. I had my sister with me. So that was also really helpful. So, I knew that like, we would walk in together, and I would really feel good. And she would
walk me to my classroom and tell me bye.” Wade said he had been coming to the school since he was very young, so he had essentially grown up immersed in the environment. “I had been coming to the school long before I ever enrolled.”

Grouping these comments together, it seems that students have used three overall strategies to increase their chances of success at a predominantly White school: maintaining a strong sense of identity, a deep belief in their teachers, and an implicit trust for the education Sedgefield has to offer.

Audit

After the first round of oral interviews, it was time to conduct the intervention — a diversity audit of the Lower School Library collection. As outlined in Chapter 3, lessons sought to train students how to conduct the audit, as well as to impart its importance. Students were then asked to suggest titles for acquisition through searching a dataset of diverse books. Participants also visited a Black bookstore to select titles. When interviewed about the audit and acquisition process, two strong themes emerged. Both reflected how autonomy can serve as a vehicle for change and empowerment.

Autonomy

When students acted independently to change the library collection, they became change agents. In doing so they demonstrated the three pillars of culturally responsive teaching: student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Theme 4: Our actions made a difference to us and others

While there was no test to assess student learning, my observations led to me to believe research participants grew from their diversity audit experience. Ladson-Billings
(2021) writes that too much focus has been put on testing as a measure of student achievement. In changing the wording to “student learning” from the original “academic achievement” (Ladson-Billings, p. 4), she notes that teacher-designed interventions and activities can produce success that cannot always be measured on a test. My assessment of student growth, therefore, is solely based on my observations.

During the diversity audit, I noticed that each student was thoroughly engaged in the process, a key ingredient for academic success (Hammond, 2015). During one of the audit lessons, all four of the Black students worked together at one table. This came about because some of them had been absent when their class attended, so they came with another class to make up the activity. It was notable that the interactions between the students and their engagement level significantly increased when they worked together as a group. Lots of laughter emanated from their table, and the amount of work produced was significant.

Their passion for the project was also evident between sessions. Many times, in the hallway, they would ask me when their class would be going to the library. The field trip to the Black bookstore was especially exciting for them, as evident by the number of times they asked me how many days were left until the trip.

Finally, when asked what they had learned from the project, some said they were struck by current trends in children’s literature, outlined in the pre-diversity audit lessons.

- Wade: “I learned that White people have the most books that is written about them or by them.”
- Xena: “There are not a lot of Asian American/Pacific Islander books, which I think is sad and it should change.”
• Zelda: “I learned that there are a lot of animal and White books.”

(Zelda was referring to the lesson in which I showed the students the *School Library Journal* graphic (Huyck & Dylen, 2019) depicting the fact that picture books about animals outnumber those about many groups of people, including Native American, Asian, and African Americans.) (SLJ Staff, 2019).

Ladson-Billings writes that, “Culturally competent students leave school at least bicultural and ideally multicultural” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 5). While it is a long time before these students graduate, the fact that they are choosing diverse titles for the collection is helping to bring about this goal both for them and all students. They are setting the stage for cultural competence to further develop. In the meantime, they showed that they are well on their way.

The book recommendations made by research participants were purposeful, powerful, and varied. Table 4.1 outlines these titles.
Table 4.1 Selection of Books Recommended by Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Diversity Audit Book Recommendations (Author/Illustrator)</th>
<th>Research Participant Recommendations (Author/Illustrator)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wade</td>
<td>Shirley Chisolm (Chambers, 2020)</td>
<td>Runaway (Shepard, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King of Ragtime (Constanza, 2021)</td>
<td>Jayden’s Impossible Garden (Manga, 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Day for Rememberin’ (Henderson, 2021)</td>
<td>Dream Street (Walker, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charlotte and the Nutcracker (Nebres, 2021)</td>
<td>Dream for a Daughter (Weatherford, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are the Supremes (Tucker, 2021)</td>
<td>I Affirm Me (Williams, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magic Like That (Doyon, 2021)</td>
<td>Isabel and her Colores go to School (Allensandri, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xena</td>
<td>Everybody is a Rainbow (Carter, 2022)</td>
<td>Adventures with my Daddies (Peter &amp; Parsons, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love Grows Everywhere (Timms &amp; Lee, 2022)</td>
<td>A Feast for Joseph (Bonny &amp; Farish, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miguel’s Community Garden (Brown-Wood, 2022))</td>
<td>One Whole Me (Mixon &amp; Jimenez Osorio, 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Palettero Man (Diaz, 2021)</td>
<td>Diarru’s Not So Different (Bayo, et al., 2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drum Girl Dream (Engle, 2015)</td>
<td>Ruby’s Birds (Thompson, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>Luna Loves Dance! (Coelho &amp; Lumbers, 2022)</td>
<td>Olu and Greta (Ejaita, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting Sick and Feeling Better, (Brown &amp; Robbins, 2022)</td>
<td>Bare Tree and Little Wind (Perkins, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Day for Rememberin’ (Henderson, 2021)</td>
<td>I Color Myself Different (Kaepernick, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Friend Like You (Gorden &amp; Murphy, 2021)</td>
<td>Becoming Vanessa (Brantley-Newton, 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Grand Day (Reidy, 2022)</td>
<td>I am Thinking my Life (Atwater, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be Strong (Zietlow Miller, 2021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zelda</td>
<td>I Am Thinking My Life (Atwater, 2022)</td>
<td>Carpenter’s Helper (Rosen &amp; Garoche, 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Big Leaf Leap (Griffin, 2022)</td>
<td>Cranky Right Now (Berry, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Friend Like You (Gordon &amp; Murphy, 2021)</td>
<td>Dream for a Daughter (Weatherford, 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boo Stew (Washington, 2021)</td>
<td>Family Reunion (Richardson et al., 2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Calvin (Ford &amp; Ford, 2021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>Isaiah Dunn Saves the Day (Baptist, 2022)</td>
<td>Everybody in the Red Brick Building (Wynter, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Book store trip - partial selections)</td>
<td>How to Be a Young Antiracist (Kendi, 2023)</td>
<td>The Smallest Spot of Dot (Davis &amp; Tyler, 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stuntboy, in the Meantime (Reynolds, 2021)</td>
<td>Momma and Mommy and Me in the Middle (LaCour, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please, Louise (Morrison &amp; Morrison, 2016)</td>
<td>Uncle John’s City Garden (Ford, 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You Are My Pride (Weatherford, 2023)</td>
<td>What Does Brown Mean to You? (Grady, 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abdul’s Story (Thompkins-Bigelow, 2022)</td>
<td>Nell Plants a Tree (Winter, 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When Aiden Became a Brother (Lukoff, 2019)</td>
<td>Catch that Chicken (Atinuke, 2022)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While each student chose to search the Black/African American category for books on Diversebookfinder.org, many of them ultimately selected titles that were intersectional, meaning that they represented more than one aspect of identity (Crenshaw, 1989). These included other racial identities, as well as gender expansive identities. I believe this is a result of their concern for experiences other than their own. Several times, Wade mentioned racial diversity outside that of African Americans. “Let’s say we have new people coming to the school. And they’re colored. I mean not specifically Black, but they are colored. I don’t want them to feel bad because they have other people bullying them for being colored.”

Yvette expressed concern that she could not find more books with multiracial characters. “I didn’t see a single book about [characters] who were mixed. Like, there are kids out there living with a Black parent and a White parent. And I didn’t see anything about that.” When I pointed out that the multiracial search could be done by clicking on another category, she seemed relieved.

Another level of the commitment to cultural competency could be evidenced by how seriously the students performed the audit. Students recommended a variety of titles, indicating that they put much thought into their selections. I observed them intently reading the publisher descriptions of each book. The fact that few titles are duplicated on each student’s list shows that they selected ones in which they were truly interested. A
disinterested student could have easily gone down the alphabetical list and written down the first 10 titles.

Having students understand their environment and giving them the tools to problem-solve is the essence of critical consciousness - the third pillar of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Similarly, culturally sustaining pedagogy “demands a critical, emancipatory vision of schooling that reframes the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 3). I believe that introducing students to the problem of a White-dominated publishing industry and allowing them to act by choosing diverse titles ignited their critical thinking skills.

Yvette talked about the difference the audit made for her personally. “I feel like this diversity audit is making me feel better about myself and feel better about other people. And I, like, care about other people and more people.” It was obvious that Yvette had internalized the lessons when she described a recent argument with one of her friends.

It showed me that there are more important people. Let me rephrase that, not more important than me because I need to be worrying about myself.

But there are other people out there that I also need to be thinking about. And instead of thinking about how I feel, I don’t know how they feel. So that was the cause [of the argument]. And I felt bad. So, I asked them what I did wrong. We fixed it out. And we’re better now.
Students felt culturally sustaining pedagogy (in this case the diversity audit) was vital to building a better curriculum and atmosphere for African-American students at Sedgefield Academy. Wade said it was important “because other people can see themselves in their books and they’ll be more interested in books because they’ll be able to reflect, and like, connect with the book.” Yvette said students need to know that they can connect with others and referred to Bishop’s (1990) mirror and windows analogy.

You have these mirrors. And these mirrors don’t look exactly like the people actually in the mirror, so you can only see a small glimpse of yourself. And I really don’t think that’s fair because you want to see all of yourself.

In this passage, Yvette was talking about a graphic in School Library Journal (2019) based on 2018 children’s book publishing data from the Children’s Book Cooperative. In the illustration, which depicts the percentage of books with characters from diverse backgrounds, various characters are holding mirrors. The only ones who can see their entire bodies are the White character and the animal. Those representing American Indians, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, and African American hold mirrors the size of which is based on the character’s level of representation in children’s books. None of these minority characters can see their entire bodies, with some only seeing a small part of their face. But being able to view themselves in their entirety is important to students in lower grades at Sedgefield Academy, according to Yvette.
I think it’s good because our first graders and kindergardeners who look like me who I don’t want to grow up like some fourth graders used to, or have been living. And I feel like it’s just good to do this stuff because you’re teaching them that like, even if you don’t look like someone that you can still connect with them. It’s a good way to talk to younger kids. And it’s a good way to talk to the children who are your age, or who are in your grade, because they might not know other stuff that you know, and you can help them learn that.

In addition to being important, every research participant expressed strong satisfaction in choosing more culturally relevant texts for the library. When asked what it felt like to have the autonomy to select books for the library, Zelda answered that she felt like a librarian and liked this power. “It makes me feel really good that I changed something for the school.” Xena agreed, adding “I thought it was fun. And it was something that I enjoyed. And I kind of felt like I was making a difference.”

Wade said he enjoyed the activity more than regular library activities because he felt powerful and because “I was able to help other people feel better about themselves by reading about themselves.” As he proceeded through the Lower School, he noted, his interest in reading increased as he found characters with whom he could identify. “When I was younger, I didn’t like books at all. I like them a little bit after I was able to see myself in books more and more over the years.” He said he hoped the changes he had
made would facilitate the same development in younger students. Yvette said she could not wait until the books she had purchased were placed in the library collection. “I bet that when I see them [on the shelves] I’m gonna be proud,” she said.

**Theme 5: Our sense of belonging increased**

Ladson-Billings (2021) refers to student learning, critical consciousness, and cultural competence as three sides of an equilateral triangle. In my study, I believe they worked together to create a tighter connection between the participants and the school. Even though the CIS survey showed that none of the students had low levels of belonging, it did show that belonging was the lowest of the three levels of engagement. After the audit, however, students said their sense of belonging to the library, to other students, and to the school overall had increased.

Xena said, “Well, I already felt comfortable in the library, but now I feel, like, more comfortable.” Her comments were noteworthy because since the start of the research project I had taken special notice that Xena’s library behavior had changed. In a variety of library classes, she had moved from sitting in the back to sitting up front. She was also more animated during lessons, asking questions and being more vocal in general. When checking out books she was more vocally and physically expressive with friends.

Zelda said the culturally responsive titles she chose made her feel more connected to the library. “At the beginning there was not that many books about, like, Black people.
But now, since we went to the [bookstore] and we got like, a few books, well like a lot of books, it feels like I can check out as many books as I want. And I can, like learn something.” Zelda added that “I still love coming to school, it’s just like, it’s more. I don’t really know. I mean, it feels like I changed the school.”

Yvette said she felt like she had a tighter connection to the students around her:

Because it’s teaching you that you’re not the only person on this planet, that there are 1000s of other continents out there and countries out there that you’ve never been because you can’t have experienced that yet. But it doesn’t matter because they are still out there even though you haven’t seen it.

Wade said his sense of belonging had increased due to what he had learned about the efforts to include marginalized populations in the children’s book publishing industry.

I feel more belonged here because I see that people, they care about us. Like, because back then, most of the time, they didn’t really care about us. And that’s why the population of White books is so high because nobody wanted to speak on our behalf.

**Theme 6: Give us freedom and choice**

Another strong message from students is that they learn better when they feel some sense of autonomy in choosing how and what they are taught. Wade said he feels
choice is important because students will not really “put their minds to” things that they do not find interesting:

Learning something that you don’t like, you know, you have to do it. But, you don’t really like it. So you have to get it done. But you won’t really enjoy it. But learning about something that you do like, you’re going to enjoy it, and you’re going to have fun with it. And you’re gonna like, maybe, sometimes you might do extra stuff just because you like doing it. And it just feels good to know that you’re gonna do good because you actually put your mind to it and did a lot of research on it. And it’s just something that you’d like so it’s just fun to you.

Wade mentioned the bookstore as the part of the research experience he liked the most. He said the autonomy of choosing the books from a Black bookstore was great because of the environment:

Like the environment was kind of, like I mentioned, something I could connect to because I’m used to being around environments that are low key, and are, you know, chill and stuff like that. It has a lot of books, first of all. You could work there. It was very low key and quiet. You could do a lot of stuff there. You could have conversations there.

Xena said asking her opinion and giving her the autonomy to choose the books in the library and at the bookstore made her feel “important.” She said, “It just made me feel
good, and I would think [more activities like this] would make other people feel good and make them feel important.” She said she would love to have more autonomy around her favorite topic - writing.

It’s less engaging when I have to write about a certain topic. I’m best at free writing because I get to write about anything and I have so many ideas that I want to write about. But there’s always a certain topic that we have to write about. So, it’s kind of hard because I’m not really able to write about different stuff.

Zelda said choice and autonomy were important to her because it opened up a new experience: “A lot of people didn’t know about it [the Black bookstore]. And I think that even if they do, it’s nice for the people that don’t know about it to learn about it.”

Another aspect of autonomy and choice was the ability to talk to a teacher about issues they were facing. Wade said the conversation allowed him to “be real” about things — an opportunity he wished he had had more often through the years. Xena agreed and said she had been waiting to have this type of conversation for a while. “It made me feel really good. And it’s been something that I wanted to talk about with a teacher but I’ve never had the chance to.” Zelda answered more generically, saying she likes talking to teachers “because they might be able to help me with [problems].”

Yvette said she thought the talking about racial concerns was an important opportunity, but she would have preferred someone with whom she could identify.
Well, normally, I would feel, like, uncomfortable because, not like anything against you, but like, I don’t really have a lot of things I could relate to. Right? So like, when I talk to you, it kind of makes me feel more comfortable knowing that a bunch of other people that look like me are talking to you, instead of just being like the only one that’s, like, getting this interview. I feel like there’s more people out there that are getting the exact same treatment like I am. So, I’m not like the only one, right? And I’ve always trusted you. I’ve always thought you’re a really wonderful teacher. And I feel like you, you’re very helpful. And I love talking to you. And I think that it’s easier to talk to someone else. But I think talking to you is a win-win.

Autonomy, however, can come with responsibility, as Yvette explained. And that responsibility can prove daunting. “It kind of feels overwhelming,” she said, “because I don’t want the entire school to be just like me. I want it to be like the thousands of other children that go here.” She said that not knowing what other students want to read made her feel like she could be choosing the wrong titles.

Despite the heavy responsibility, students had no trouble carrying out the last step of the diversity audit – the culturally sustaining library walk. Normally a procedure designed to measure student, teacher, and administrative feedback on several library touch points, this walk was adapted to allow only research participants to comment on the
physical space. Students walked around the library to evaluate seating, book and wall displays, and any other item that factored into their perception of the library. They were asked two questions: “What do you like about the library space” and “What would you change about the library space if you could?” Comfortable seating and the reading treehouse topped everyone’s “favorites” list. Suggestions for improvement included wall art that featured books, brightly colored mosaics, more foreign language books, more graphic novels, as well as having teachers allow more library visits during the day.

Summary

The question that guided this research project asked fourth-grade Black students to help decenter Whiteness at a Southern, predominantly White, private school. Long a place for elite and wealthy families, such schools are now working to recruit more students of color (French, 2018). But their success has been limited primarily to Asian students (National Association of Independent Schools, 2023). But what about the Black students who have chosen to attend these schools? They are navigating a school experience where few people look like them. Black and African-American parents at Sedgefield Academy say this is a problem. They have urged administrators to institute changes to help their students thrive. One of these is transforming the curriculum to make it more culturally relevant to their children’s lives.

To make the curriculum more culturally relevant, I asked these fourth graders what changes they would make to the Lower School Library curriculum if given the
chance. How would they make things better for themselves and other students? Then I asked them how taking such action made them feel. Using self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as well the tenets of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris, 2012), I examined their answers.

In this section students have expressed their feelings of discontent over the number of Black teachers and students at Sedgefield. They have criticized the curriculum for teaching mostly about the White experience. Despite these obstacles, they have developed strategies to ensure their ability to succeed both socially and academically in a White space. And when given autonomy and choice, students have been able to supplement a library collection where they and other minority students can now see themselves. Using a culturally sustaining pedagogical intervention, they have increased their learning and are on the road to cultural competence and critical consciousness. By doing so, they have also become more invested in their school community.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For decades, Sedgefield Academy has taught a curriculum based on White conceptions of excellence to its majority White student body. This has created an uncomfortable situation for the non-White students, who school officials have increasingly tried to recruit over the last decade. As one of the lowest percentages on campus, Black students in particular face challenges. A 2020 parent memo called for several initiatives to make the school more responsive to its Black students. Among these was revamping the curriculum to be more reflective of the Black experience.

This research project investigated how one curricular intervention – a diversity audit of the Lower School library collection – would affect participating Black students. Specifically, it asked if putting them in charge of the project would increase their sense of belonging to the school. It also probed what changes they would suggest to the library curriculum, i.e. what new books to purchase and what old ones to remove.

After collecting data through an engagement survey, pre-audit interviews, the audit activity, and post-audit interviews and activity, six themes emerged among participants.

- They want more students and teachers who look like them.
- They feel the curriculum is told through a White narrative.
- They have developed strategies to ensure their success at school.
- They felt their participation in a culturally responsive intervention (the diversity audit) made the school better.
• They felt that participating in a culturally responsive intervention (the diversity audit) made them more connected to the library, friends, and school.

• They value curricular activities that offer freedom and choice.

**Results Related to Existing Literature**

I have sought to frame these findings within Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT), assisted by Ladson-Billings (2009) and Paris’s (2012) culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Hammond (2018) writes that the principles of cognitive science, such as SDT’s relatedness, autonomy, and competence, have always been at the center of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the two work in tandem to increase the chances of success in the classroom. Using a cognitive framework, coupled with a culturally responsive curricular intervention, I set out to investigate the experience of Black students at Sedgefield Academy.

In Chapter 2, I offered existing literature that supported three themes pertaining to my research questions. They were:

• African-American students need to see themselves in the curriculum.

• African-American students need opportunities to challenge the status quo and act against it.

• African-American students need to feel connected to a learning community.

Collected data revealed support for each of these. In pre-audit interviews, each student reported dissatisfaction that the curriculum was centered around a White narrative. This could be evidenced, they said, by the lack of diverse stories included in the curriculum, including the library. When these stories did become known, it was usually during a
special month, like Black History Month. This disconnection from the curriculum can endanger Black student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009) because it de-legitimizes the Black experience. Teachers who relate curriculum to the lives and culture of their students witness more engagement, which, in turn, leads to more academic success.

Post-audit interviews indicated that students were engaged in and empowered by the curricular intervention in this study – the library diversity audit. Each reported that they learned important information, increased their knowledge about others, and acted to make the school a better place to learn. These remarks indicate that students met all three of the benchmarks for culturally responsive pedagogy – student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2009). They were able to listen to the lessons on White publishing trends, internalize the message of inequity, and act upon it. Being able to act also indicates that students felt a high level of relatedness, competence, and autonomy – the three tenets of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When students have internalized an activity, they view it as important and have integrated into their own value system. This results in a closer connection to teachers and other students. They also take pride in the feeling that they can carry out the activity successfully and make decisions on their own. Further, students expressed that they wanted more activities that allowed for freedom and choice.

Connection to the learning community was a theme prevalent in study findings. Most of this data was collected in the pre-audit stage, as the researcher sought to gain an overall picture of the participants’ school experience. Fourth-graders criticized Sedgefield Academy for not having enough Black students and teachers. They gave numerous examples of how this affected their everyday lives. Many spoke of the isolation of being
the only Black student in the classroom. Several discussed not having teachers with whom they could identify. One said she grew tired of explaining cultural references to her non-Black classmates. And while students who feel disconnected to a school cannot reach their full potential, according to the theoretical frameworks guiding my research, these students have somehow developed strategies to keep their engagement at adequate levels. A standardized engagement survey showed their levels in the mid to high range.

**Practice Recommendations**

These findings have several implications for independent school practitioners. Although my intervention concerned a Lower School Library, this research probed a wider range of issues to understand the feelings and attitudes each student brought to my space. It will, therefore, take efforts by teachers, librarians, and administrators at these schools to address the recommendations listed below.

**Implement more culturally responsive curricular interventions**

In the library, creating a more culturally responsive curriculum starts with the implementation of an annual diversity audit by fourth graders. Because the audit proved to be effective with research participants, I believe it is worthwhile to continue. But why give them just one chance to choose books for the collection? Creating a student library advisory committee could give students more of an opportunity to have input into book selection and even programming for the library.

Laws in some states require libraries to have such committees, and in an elementary setting these are mostly run by adults (Buzzeo, 2009). However, I envision a committee of third and fourth-grade students who would meet periodically to advise me on what they want from their library. These meetings could seek input on new books for purchase.
and solicit ideas for special events either during or after school. With the increasing number of book bans in the country (American Library Association, 2022), this could also serve to instill the critical consciousness of which Ladson-Billings talks (2009). Discussion during the meetings could also address the marked increase of bans targeting books about people of color and gender expansive people and how that affects our purchasing abilities. Gauging their understanding of these issues could help me prepare lessons for library classes. Students could even give input on these lessons, as well as others that include culturally relevant teaching strategies.

It was clear from student comments, however, that these lessons should not be confined to the library. Their comments on freedom and choice suggest that similar instructional strategies should be employed in many other subject areas – math, social studies, and all special areas (art, music, physical education, etc.) To facilitate widespread incorporation, I would suggest an immediate professional development push to arm teachers with as many culturally relevant teaching strategies as possible. Teachers could then choose the ones that work best for their subject area, giving them some choice and ownership in the process.

**Continue faculty identity work**

In conjunction with implementing culturally responsive curricular interventions, our faculty must also commit to identity work. Learning about their biases is crucial to carrying out this work effectively. Critical pedagogies must also be introduced and explained, so that faculty can understand the discerning eye that is required for this work. It might be wise to take a historical look at the development of these pedagogies, starting with Paulo Freire’s *utopian pedagogy*, described as “a dialogical praxis in which the
teachers and learners together, in the act of analysing a dehumanising reality, denounce it while announcing its transformation in the name of the liberation of man” (Friere, 1972, as cited in Webb, 2017, p. 522). Ladson-Billings’s (1998) “Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?” would be a good discussion piece, as it positions the theory directly in the field of education. Critical friend groups (named as such to distinguish them from already established student racial affinity groups and faulty religious affinity groups) might also be developed so that discussions can run deeper in more intimate settings.

**Target professional development**

Once a baseline level of understanding is achieved, professional development should delve into culturally relevant pedagogy – both *what it is* and *what it is not*. In 2014, Ladson-Billings wrote that in many places the pedagogy she created was being implemented in ways that were almost unrecognizable to her.

What state departments, school districts, and individual teachers are now calling “culturally relevant pedagogy” is often a distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted to promulgate. The idea that adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting “diverse” images makes one “culturally relevant” seem to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82)

As cited earlier in this paper, French (2018) notes that many independent schools have mastered the act of performing this type of shallow diversity work. So, it is imperative that any future professional development be clear about detailing the goals of culturally responsive pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2014) wrote that the most overlooked of the three
CRP tenets is critical consciousness. So, I believe discussions should focus on the sociopolitical aims of the pedagogy.

A plethora of books exist on the market today that further refine Ladson-Billings’s work. Muhammad’s (2021) *Historically Responsive Literacy* offers an equity framework, which consists of identity development, skill development, and intellectual development. Hammond’s (2015) work, rooted in neuroscience, puts forth the *Ready for Rigor* framework, which is based on awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and creating a community of learners. Ladson-Billings (2021) has continued to publish and recommend updates to her initial research. She has offered strategies for specific subject areas, as well as for teacher education. The work of Paris and Alim (2017) offers ways to use culturally sustaining pedagogy with a variety of populations and across disciplines as well. Any of these texts could provide guidance for teachers at Sedgefield. Teachers should be given the freedom to explore the ones that are most relevant to their classrooms.

**Set up feedback sessions with students**

While teachers are learning and growing, administrators must also set in place a plan for listening to feedback from students. A significant finding from my research is that students want to be heard by the people who teach them. Fortunately, these students expressed both a sufficient level of engagement in the school and trust in their teachers. That means that the stage is set for things to get even better. Administrators should capitalize on this atmosphere to make Black students feel more a part of the Sedgefield community.
One way to do this might be through the school’s affinity groups, which began last year. If leaders of these groups use some of the time to ascertain student opinions on various issues, this data could be used to effect change. I do believe, however, that this will not replace one-on-one conversations between teachers and students. My research participants all expressed satisfaction in being able to sit down with a teacher and talk about the issues they face.

**Increase the number of Black students and teachers**

Finally, Sedgefield must continue its efforts to recruit more Black students to its campus. As stated earlier, the population of the city surrounding the school is 37% Black. Geographically, therefore, African Americans are vastly underrepresented at the school. Recruitment of African-American students has been an ongoing effort at independent schools across the nation, but little headway has been made (NAIS, 2023). But simply saying “recruit more” will not solve the problem. Black families will not stay at the school if they do not feel their children are getting a good education. And education, of course, starts with the curriculum, changes for which I have outlined above. As research participants indicated, this needed recruitment also extends to teachers who look like them and can understand their lived experiences.

**Implementation Plan**

To enact these plans, I will present them to our Diversity, Equity, and Engagement team (DEE). The team is headed by a director, who has the authority to address recommendations on the continued recruitment of Black students and teachers, as well as continued practice of faculty identity work. Because I serve as the DEE curricular consultant for the Preschool and Lower School, I can take steps to implement
comprehensive professional development training concerning both critical and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Effective professional development should address five areas: content focus (the subject to be taught, as well as knowledge about how students learn it); collective participation (collaboration and discussion by a team of learners); active learning (working with content in active and passive ways); duration (learning over a span of time, not just once); and coherence (lining content up with personal views as well as school policy) (Martin et al., 2014). Planning will include all these components to ensure that teachers have actionable strategies to take back to their classrooms over the next three to five years.

As for the library, I have the authority to add the diversity audit as an annual event. I can also recruit a student-led library advisory committee and act upon any recommendations from it. I can implement any new culturally relevant teaching strategies that I learn from professional development at any point.

Reflection on Research Methodology

A qualitative research design featuring an initial survey, oral interviews, and intervention served to solicit the type of information I needed to assess my problem of practice. As fourth graders, these students were eager to share their opinions, thus the amount of data gathered from their interviews was substantive. Mining through their copious commentary allowed me to easily identify themes to understand how these students felt about attending a predominantly White independent school, what they thought about curriculum, and what changes they would make to the library collection. Further by conducting the diversity audit intervention, I was able to test how acting upon
the problem would affect these students. And I was able to make the library collection
more culturally responsive to them by purchasing the titles they suggested. I have always
believed that we can find the solutions to problems by asking those who are most affected
by them. This project proved to be no different.

One part of the project I have reflected on heavily is the inclusion of material
outside the scope of the library. Action research projects should be focused and research
questions should be concise (Efron & Ravid, 2020). While this project focused on the
library curriculum, much of the pre-audit work probed the overall engagement level of
Black students and how they felt about attending a private, White school in general. I
eventually determined that the library intervention and post-audit activities could not be
divorced from how the students felt about Sedgefield Academy as a whole. These
students brought their feelings and attitudes about attending school to the diversity audit,
so these needed to be documented. Likening it to Gee’s (1989) primary discourse
(literacy skills learned at home) versus their secondary discourse (literacy skills learned
in the world), I felt that a primary school discourse – how they experienced a White,
independent school - needed to be understood before delving into a secondary school
discourse – how they experienced the library.

While much of the data collection yielded results I had anticipated, I was not
prepared for the high levels of engagement measured by the Communities In Schools
survey. After interviewing students, however, I began to understand that the participants
had developed coping strategies to keep their participation in and commitment to the
school at acceptable levels. They all spoke of valuing their relationships with teachers;
three of them mentioned staying true to themselves; and they all relied on relationships
with siblings and relatives who had attended. They said they believed the education they received from Sedgefield was better than other schools. Whether developed internally over time or through conversations with parents, they had found a way to appreciate aspects of their school experience. This valuable information gives Sedgefield faculty something to build on as we strive to make the curriculum more responsive to these students.

**Limitations/Suggestions**

A significant limitation of this study is that it was conducted by a White researcher. Overall, I was heartened by the willingness of Black students to be vulnerable with me, but at times I felt they were trying to protect my feelings. In these instances, I tried to ask follow-up questions in a way that made them feel safer. One example occurred when I asked Zelda how she felt about the library collection. In her pre-audit interview, she said she could find plenty of library books that met her needs. But after learning about White publishing trends during the diversity audit lessons, she was more willing to talk about a lack of representation in the collection. Did the lessons give her the language to talk about a lack of diversity without seeming like it was my fault? Unfortunately, I did not think to ask the question after the audit. I believe a Black researcher could have gotten these students to reveal more.

Another limitation to this research concerned the inclusion of parent data. I initially planned to ask parents about the diversity audit, but ultimately decided the sole focus should be on students. By the time I realized that a few limited questions could improve the results, it was too late. The request for parent data came in the summer, when many families travel. Also, by this time, students had already graduated to another division.
Recommendations for Future Study

Talk to parents

If I were to continue this project, I would proceed in two directions. First, I would follow up with the parents of research participants. In addition to finding out how they felt about the diversity audit, it would be interesting to see how students talk about their overall school experience at home. And it would be enlightening to hear the opinions of parents. Why did they choose an independent school for their children? Were they aware of the lack of racial representation at the school? If so, what factors played into their decision to send their children to Sedgefield?

A second area for investigation stems from the 2020 memo from the Parents of Black and African-American students. Because it claims that the Sedgefield curriculum has a negative effect on students, I would try to determine exactly when the level of student engagement declines. In my study this was not yet evident. Each student measured acceptable levels of satisfaction with and engagement in the school. So, when does this first occur? Surveys directed to our middle and high school students would likely elicit such information. Then in-depth student interviews could help to determine what changes need to be made to alleviate the problem.

Another question for Black parents is whether the type of intervention used in this study is worthwhile. One of the criticisms of social justice projects by White researchers at predominantly White schools could be that they fall under the category of the *White savior complex*. Finnegan (2022) defines this phenomenon as “a network of relationships and resources that is guided by an ideology that centers White bodies as essential helpers to respond to social problems” (Finnegan, 2022, p. 617). Aronson (2017) states that if
these networks remain unexamined, they support and undermine racial inequality. In other words, good intentions by White educators will not amount to much if they do not get to the root of the problem.

So, the question becomes, “Does this study get to the root of the problem?” The answer is obvious: No, it does not. This research project only presents the manifestations of the inequities facing the independent school world. As stated earlier, Black enrollment at these schools sits at 6.5% (National Association of Independent Schools, 2023). Talking to four fourth-grade Black students will not do much to change this fact. But it is, perhaps, a start. Investigating the discomfort these students face is the first step toward alleviating it. Alleviating the discomfort could, in turn, help the school retain these students and families. Retaining these students and families might then lead to recruiting more Black members to the school community. But we must get that ball rolling. Asking them about the effectiveness of our efforts could go far in determining whether we are digging beneath the surface or simply moving around the topsoil.

**Summary**

The next frontier for culturally responsive pedagogy is predominantly White schools that serve the wealthiest students, according to theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings (Will, 2022). She writes that avoiding issues of inequity only puts these students at a disadvantage when they graduate and go out into the world. While I applaud these efforts, I think there is another group of independent school students for which this need is immediate – African Americans. Going to school with few people with whom they can identify and learning from a curriculum that does not reflect their experience, can have ill effects. This is the assertion made by some parents at Sedgefield Academy.
Students in this research study were asked to speak about how a culturally relevant intervention— a diversity audit of the Lower School library collection - affected their sense of belonging. To determine this, they were given an initial engagement survey, as well as pre- and post-audit interviews. Results showed that students had satisfactory levels of engagement, but these increased after being given decision-making authority over the library collection. They felt they had increased their knowledge, made the school better for the Black students who follow them, and wanted more activities which were relevant to their lives and allowed them to act against the status quo.

Through extensive professional development, Sedgefield faculty can increase their knowledge of critical pedagogies and how to bring more culturally responsive instruction to their classrooms. Through in-depth conversations with parents and further research into engagement levels over the course of a student’s career, we can determine what improves the school experience. It is only by continuing the research in these areas that we will truly decenter the White gaze for African-American students at Sedgefield Academy.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Questions for individual student interviews (pre-audit)

1. How long have you attended Sedgefield Academy?
2. If you have siblings, do they attend Sedgefield Academy? (If not, where do they go to school?)
3. If you were to describe Sedgefield Academy to someone who had never been there, what would you say?
4. How would you describe your school experience?
5. What do you like/not like about school?
6. Do you feel a strong connection to the school? Why or why not?
7. How often do you talk about school at home?
8. Do you socialize with school friends outside of school?
9. Who is the most important person to you at Sedgefield Academy – friends, teachers, etc.?
10. If you could change one thing about Sedgefield Academy, what would it be?

Questions for student focus group (pre-audit)

1. Let’s talk about your experiences at Sedgefield Academy. How would you describe them?
2. Do you feel a strong connection to the school? Why?
3. If you were going to tell a new African-American student about Sedgefield Academy, what would you say? What advice would you give them?

Questions for individual student interviews (post-audit)

1. What did you think about the activity?
2. How would you compare it to other educational activities at Sedgefield Academy?
3. Describe how you felt about having decision-making control over the curriculum.
4. Did this activity change affect how you feel about school? How?
5. Would you enjoy having other activities like this in the curriculum? Why or why not?
Questions for student focus group (post-audit)

1. Let’s discuss the diversity audit of the library collection. How would you describe the experience?
2. How is it different/the same as other activities in the curriculum?
3. Would you like to see other activities like this in the curriculum?
APPENDIX B

DIVERSITY AUDIT FORM

Diversity Audit
Form description

Class
☐

Title of Book
Short answer text

Call #
Short answer text

Author
Short answer text
Race/Ethnicity of Author

- White
- Black
- South Asian (i.e. India)
- Asian (i.e. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, etc.)
- American Indian
- Hispanic
- No photo available in back

Publication Year

Short answer text

Are the main characters human or non-human?

- Human
- Non-human
Human Characters
Description (optional)

Are the main characters white or non-white?

- White
- Non-white

Can you tell anything about the cultural background of the main characters? If so, what?
Long answer text

Main Characters: Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary (doesn't identify as male or female)
Main Characters: Religion

- Can't tell
- Jewish
- Christian
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Hindu
- Other...

Main Characters: Ability (Is the main character differently abled? Are they in a wheelchair? Do they wear glasses? Are they sick? Do they learn differently?)

Short answer text
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is this story about? (short description of plot)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Long answer text</td>
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<th>Special notes about text or illustrations</th>
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