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Documenting the Journey Towards Becoming an Anti-Racist White Educator

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
with an emphasis in  
Educational Policy and Leadership

August 2021

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**Abstract**

As a White teacher in public education, I have had the great pleasure of educating students from all over the globe. My career began in a district that served predominantly White students from middle class families. The only Black students I interacted with were those bused in from the city while participating in the desegregation program. There were noticeable biases and beliefs teachers held toward those students. However, since I was early on in my career with little experience, I was unaware of damage being done to these students. Once I began working for an extremely diverse district, in a building with a population of approximately 80% Black students and 90% free and reduced lunch, I began to notice discrepancies in the attitudes other teachers in our districts had about our specific student population. After the building closed and the students were dispersed into majority White populated schools, it became apparent that students of color did not academically perform as well as their White counterparts. The students suffered from both academic and discipline disparities. Further research showed students of color and those in special education are at the highest risk of being suspended and expelled because of the unequal discipline strategies White teachers enacted (Gonzalez, 2015). I believe this disparity can be attributed to bias and racism, which leads to low interest in school and higher dropout rates, directly correlating to jail time and keeps the school-to-prison pipeline open (Schiff, 2013).

Through autoethnography I used reflexive journaling of my personal experiences, noting points of inflection or potential change in my awareness, by interrogating my racial biases. I shared my reflections on my own narratives to attempt to see my Whiteness through the theoretical framework of Critical Whiteness Studies so that I may gain an

understanding on how my teaching pedagogy impacts students of color. Analytical reflection created fundamental understanding on how I, as a White teacher, can combat inequity in discipline strategies used against Black students, advocate for equitable curriculum instruction that is culturally relevant, and diminish racial biases in myself and other White teachers in the hopes of promoting anti-racist teaching in public education.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my two sons, Tyler and Conner. You have been a constant support and incredibly patient with me as I have pushed through the tedious journey of three consecutive degrees to obtain this PhD. Your encouraging words and late-night company as I researched and wrote mean more to me than words could ever express. Tyler, I value the time you took to allow me to problem solve, bounce ideas off you and critique my work. It has been a joy to simultaneously take college courses with you and watch you grow as a learner. I often feel I have learned as much from you as you have from me in this process. Conner, thank you for understanding my many deadlines and the needed support you seemed to sense I needed when you would quietly hang out in my office or check on me in the middle of the night. Having you begin college as I am finishing has been empowering and exciting to witness. I know being stuck in the house for eighteen months during a world-wide pandemic was not your first choice, but I have treasured the unexpected gift of that time. Being able to share this accomplishment with you both means everything to me. I love you!

This dissertation is also dedicated to my incredible husband, Ross McCord. We began our journey as I was embarking on my first Masters and you have been by my side through the entire eight years of non-stop graduate work as I strived to reach my goal set by my nineteen-year-old self of obtaining a PhD. Not once have you complained about the time or money, instead you have tirelessly listened to my ideas, theories, offered hugs and wiped away tears of frustration. You stepped up as a full-time parent for my boys when I was writing, allowing me the opportunity to truly spread my academic wings. I will forever be grateful. I love you!

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my sister Jen Brockmeyer and my tight knit circle of friends that act as my family. Jen, you are my best friend. I could never have mentally made it through this challenge without your constant support and words of affirmation. The past eight years have brought on a plethora of life choices and decisions that you have held my hand while I navigated. When we put our heads together we are the two strongest women I know! To my friends that act as my family, you know who you are. Loren, you are like a sister to me, and academically brilliant. The mental breaks and conversations have literally saved my life. Talking through my thoughts has helped me formulate this dissertation. Marla, your belief in me began eleven years ago and you have continued to push me to be my best self. You have seen me at my highs and lows and have always kept me on the path to success. Thank you for listening to me cry, laugh and celebrate all of the milestones. I could not have asked for a better principal and friend. Kathy, you not only started me on my doctoral journey, but ignited a passion in me to make a difference with my work. As my editor and friend, you had a front row seat to this dissertation as it evolved. Thank you for picking up the phone late at night to parse through my writing blocks and always texting back. I am honored to get to work with you. For all of your advice, friendships, ideas, and encouragement I am forever grateful. It truly takes a village and you are all my amazing people!

Last but not least, I dedicate this to my fourteen-year-old black Persian cat Moomie. You have kept me nonstop company for over eight years while I typed away on my laptop. I could always count on you to jump on the table wherever I was working and hang out until all hours of the night. Together we have worked through two Masters and a Ph.D. You are the epitome of unrelenting friendship!

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I would like to acknowledge my committee members- Dr. Phyllis Balcerzak, Ph.D., Dr. Thomasina Hassler, Ph.D., and Dr. Thomas Hoer, Ph.D. Thank you for your time, patience, and feedback. Through the challenging questions you provided, I have grown exponentially as an academic, writer and overall human. Through your guidance and suggestions, I have learned to embrace change, think outside the box, and effectively communicate my thoughts. I am honored to work with such brilliant minds.

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you as my chair. I thank my lucky stars daily that God brought you into my life to finish out my Ph.D. journey. I can never thank you enough.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of my educational leaders and colleagues that have gotten me to this point. Marla, you have been my principal for eleven years and have continued to support me through everything. I have learned from you and value your wisdom and examples of how to effectively lead a building that values student learning and equity. Through this you have become a close friend and someone I can be honest and vulnerable with. You have played a fundamental part in who I am as an educator. My colleagues, who became close friends in the process. I can never begin to thank you for your encouragement, guidance, and support. Each one of you have played an important part in my journey, whether it be reading my work, setting me straight, pointing out my naive whiteness, or just taking a deep breath before teaching me about Black culture. I am blessed to have you in my life and cherish your friendship and never-ending patience with me. This dissertation is just the beginning of the work I plan to do!



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The screaming shattered the quiet concentration that engulfed my fourth-grade classroom, which had lent itself to an ideal testing situation for our unit Math test. Loud sighs from my students escaped as I quickly headed toward my door to shut out the noise. As I peered out and down the hall I witnessed the same Black student beating on the thick wooden door for entrance back into her third-grade classroom. Her temper escalated as she pounded on the door, jiggled the handle and demanded entrance back into her learning environment. The young White teacher peered out the door's slim rectangular window with what I interpreted as a smug expression that implied she was the winner in this battle. My heart sank even deeper as the crisis team rounded the corner and entered my hallway with a hurried and determined gait. After having little success with calming her down, she was forcibly encouraged to walk toward the office with three adults flanking her sides and bringing up the rear behind her, lest she change her mind and try to head back toward her classroom. By the end of the day, I learned through a hallway conversation this student would be suspended for being disrespectful to her teacher. The girl's teacher dramatically retold the story with a in the end I won finale. This misguided interaction would ultimately result in the student missing two days of school instruction.

Too many times I have witnessed our Black students in the hallway, alone, and alienated from the rest of the classroom community. Unfortunately, uninformed teachers do not understand the effects of systemic racism, which plays a significant part in student learning and behaviors. Black, Hispanic, and Special Needs students experience a much higher discipline rate than those of their White counterparts for the same infractions (Gonzalez, 2015). This not only discourages student learning, but damages the school-to-

home relationship, and creates a feeling of mistrust between students and their educators (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Throughout my career as an elementary teacher I have witnessed a plethora of situations that have caused me to question the equity of minority students in public education. As an educator, I have learned firsthand social justice problems occur when inequitable treatment happens amongst a group of individuals who legally should have equitable access to job opportunities, independent earning potential and societal privileges. "Social justice is delineated into two separate, but co-dependent categories" (Pachamama Alliance, 2019, p. 1). This includes "Intersocial Treatment, which is based on personally held biases, and include race, gender, and mental or physical abilities, as well as Unequal Government Regulation, which limits or denies groups' access to the same opportunities and resources relative to the rest of society" (Pachamama Alliance, 2019, p. 2). Prevalent disadvantages afforded to students of color in the realm of public education continue to follow the historical trajectory of inequitable discipline for identical infractions of White students in the classroom (Schiff, 2013). This directly correlates to missed educational opportunities and valuable learning time, which in turn contribute to the already wide learning gap that is prevalent between students of color and White students (Gonzalez, 2015). This is a serious social justice issue that continues to persist in public education and directly affects children.

Racial disparity is an ongoing pattern of behavior that has dominated our societal structure for hundreds of years and continues today (Hunt & Morice, 2008).

Comprehending the role of race in the achievement gap mandates one to delve into the educational history of the United States, as "race had been a fundamental organizing

principle since before the country's founding, racialization led not only to the formation of the entrenched cultural belief system that suggested some people were essentially different and better than others" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 5). This provides insight into how individuals of color experienced inequitable opportunities that spanned a myriad of avenues that not only included "homeownership and job opportunities, but educational experiences as well" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 16). Instead of analyzing the culture of public education and how that directly affects students of color, predominantly White teaching staff (Matias, 2016) prefer to deflect and accept the frequent claims that Black and Latino students perform at subpar academic levels to their White counterparts because of a lack of effort or personal investment in their education (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This mantra contributes to creating an inequitable environment for all students in public education and becomes glaringly obvious in inequitable discipline, academic tracking, and student's overall school experience (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). School districts continue to target their focus on domineering White-based curriculum in preparation for standardized state testing, where White students continuously outperform their Black and Latino counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This disparity continues to exist in discipline and suspension rates, which begs one to question what is going wrong in public education (Lustick, 2015).

Literature and data support the existence of the vast inequalities against Black students and the racism that plagues them throughout their educational lives (Kafka, 2011). However, there is considerably less information about the implicit biases and racism White teachers have against their students of color. White teachers may not knowingly engage in microaggressions against their students. Nevertheless, whether they

recognize their racism or not, our students of color pay the price (Matias, 2016). Through the process of autoethnography I have examined my own racism, biases, and how that affected and diminished my own students' educational experience. This challenging work is worth investigating and discussing so that I can better understand myself in the hopes of being an anti-racist teacher for all my students. Concurrently, I hope while instigating dialogue with other White teachers on my essential findings it will begin to promote systemic change.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this autoethnographic study I used Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as the theoretical framework to increase my personal understanding of how my White privilege and bias affects students and staff of color in the public education setting. "Critical Whiteness Studies is a field of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege" (Applebaum, 2016, p. 1). Critical researchers of Whiteness identify racial hegemonic position (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 29) as a result of the "invisibility of Whiteness or its ability to remain unseen" (hooks, 1997, p. 341).

Harris (1993) suggests,

Whiteness is best understood as a form of property rights that is systemically protected by social institutions such as law. Whiteness involves a culturally, socially, politically, and institutionally produced and reproduced system on institutional processes and individual practices that benefit white people while simultaneously marginalizing others (p. 1783).

An example is “if a person of color is the victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would have been rented to the person of color is still available for the White renter” (Tatum, 1997, p. 9). I believe this demonstrates that White people have a personal investment in sustaining an unjust system. This unjust status quo has been likened to a fishbowl to “elucidate how an invisible system of white norms is the condition of racism” (Morrison, 1992, p. 17). “If one focuses exclusively on the water and the fish, Morrison explains, one does have to acknowledge how the fishbowl itself frames where and what happens within it” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 1).

Morrison (1992) describes...

it is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl-the glide and flash of the golden scales... and then I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently and invisibly permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world (p. 17).

It is relatively recent that Critical Whiteness Study has been categorized to include an academic field of study, “committed to disrupting racism by problematizing whiteness as a corrective to the traditional exclusive focus on the racialized other” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 1). Focusing the research attention on the pedagogy of the oppressor is “to look head-on at the site of dominance” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6) and thus “an essential counter strategy on how Whiteness historically has controlled the gaze of the subordinate Other (ex. slaves)” (hooks, 2013, p. 42). By focusing “on the pedagogy of the oppressor it turns what is generally regarded as a subject into a researched object” (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 32), which in turn forces the researcher to “look behind the mirror” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 78) regarding what is stated to be represented.

When closely analyzing the behavior of White supremacy as a form of oppression, Iris Marion Young (1990) explains it as, “a structural concept that is reproduced by the everyday practices of a well-intentioned society” (p. 136). The direct result of White supremacy has a destructive impact on the lives of the racially marginalized, while at the same time providing benefits and privileges for Whites as a collective group (Applebaum, 2016). Where some practices and policies may not seem deliberate or intentionally racist they can still be contributing factors to the maintenance of an inequitable system. As hooks (2013) explains,

When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs, even they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination...they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated (p.113).

It is important to address the use of capitalization of race in this study. There are varying opinions on the capitalization of Black and White when recognizing race in written text. I chose to capitalize both. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) explains, “Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase is simply a color” (Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, p. 1). “It is common to see Black in lower case, even though other racial and ethnic groups like Asian, Latinx, and Native, are routinely capitalized” (Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, p. 1). It is important to recognize Black as a group of individuals, and value their humanity. Capitalizing White in written text calls “attention to White as a race as a way to understand and give voice to how Whiteness functions in our social and political institutions and our communities”

(Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, p. 2). The use of W in White has a history of dominance. However, “the detachment of White as a proper noun allows White people to sit out of conversations about race and removes accountability from White people’s and White institutions' involvement in racism” (Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, p. 2). Capitalizing White in this study does not represent violence or supremacy, instead it is used “to invite people and ourselves, to think deeply about the ways Whiteness survives-and is supported both explicitly and implicitly” (Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, p. 2).

When looking at White supremacy and racism, it is imperative to understand racism is often considered exclusively as having stereotypes, or a set of prejudiced beliefs which result in negative attitudes toward racial groups (Applebaum, 2016). When there is the misunderstanding that racism is only about prejudice there becomes the issue that one can be complicit in the perpetuation of racism, even if that individual believes they are not prejudiced (Applebaum, 2016, p. 3). “Most significantly, one can be complicit even if one has good intentions” (Tatum, 1997, p. 98). This reproduction of White supremacy can be hidden behind the veil of good intentions. A frequent example found in public education by White educators is the statement that one is colorblind in an attempt to overlook and ignore racial and cultural differences. Not only does this not promote racial justice, but it steals away a part of that child’s fundamental identity. “The apparent well-intended gestures of colorblindness perpetuated by White teachers toward students of color makes it difficult, if not impossible to acknowledge institutional racism or one’s personal part in it” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 3). “If contextualism and critical theory teach anything, it is that we rarely challenge our own preconceptions, privileges, and the standpoint from which we reason” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 42).



## **Key Words and Definitions**

Throughout this document, I utilized specific vocabulary appropriate for my research. To ensure complete understanding of the content, it is important to define those terms as they appear in this study.

***Abolitionist Teaching***- “acknowledgment of White privilege along with critical analysis and reflection on (racialized) emotions, and how these emotions are construed through Whiteness so these displays may counteract anti-racist endeavors in the classroom” (Matias, 2016, p. 26).

***Abolitionist Educational Experience***- liberatory experience which “is truly inclusive and enables students to understand concepts and see truth; to hold on to their own truths even when they are unpopular, or contrary to the status quo” (Lewis, 2019, p. 2).

***Anti-racism***- “the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes so that the power is redistributed and shared equitably” (Singh, 2019, p. 6).

***Autoethnography***- “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand a cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273).

***Becky Behavior***- Matias (2020) explains Becky as a White female full of privilege whose “characterization is connected to the dehumanization of people of color” (Matias, 2020, p. 9). “The term Becky itself is simply a characterization of a white woman who engages in privilege and power in deleterious ways” (Matias, 2020, p. 9).

***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***- “a theoretical and methodological paradigm aimed at the examination and elimination of race, class, and gender oppression” (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 493).

***Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)***- “Scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 2).

***Hegemonic/hegemony***- “influence or authority over others, the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2021).

***Hidalguismo***- “son of God status, in its quest to exert its brand of civilization on non-white nations” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 31).

***Hidden Curriculum***- “Informal lessons often unintentionally taught in an educational setting, which can include attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors around gender, morals, or cultural expectations” (Blakeley, 2020, p. 1).

***Intersocial Treatment***- “Treatment based on personally held biases, and include race, gender, and mental or physical abilities, as well as Unequal Government Regulation, which denies groups’ access to the same opportunities and resources relative to the rest of society” (Pachamama Alliance, 2019, p. 2).

***Institutional literacy***- crucial component for White teachers to identify White privilege in the realm of public education, and in their overall lives. This means actively restructuring, reimagining and rewriting the narrative of culturally inclusive spaces (Lyiscott, 2019).

***Liberatory Education***- enables students to understand concepts and see truths, even when those are unpopular. Derived from Paulo Freire's (1970) critical consciousness "critical for freedom, autonomy, and justice" (p. 44). "Any attempt to prevent human freedom (education) is an act of violence" (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

***Macroaggression***- "severe acts of racism such as lynchings, beatings, and cross burnings" (Pierce, 1970, p. 266).

***Microaggression***- "Black-white racial interactions that are characterized by white-put-downs, done in an automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion" (Pierce, 1974, p. 515).

***Mother Scholar***- term first coined by Matias (2011), "those who creatively weave their maternal identities into their scholarly spaces" (Burrow et al., 2020, p. 1).

***Restorative Circles***- provides opportunity for individuals to communicate openly about hurts and transgressions in a non-oppressive space, while listening to the perspective of others. This can be used for "conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making, information exchange and relationship development" (Watchel, 2013, p. 7).

***Restorative Justice***- an approach to justice which offers victims and their supporters the opportunity to talk directly with their offenders through the use of a restorative circle which has defined protocols to allow the offender to repair harm done to the offended (Watchel, 2013).

***School-to-prison pipeline***- "Suspended youth directly referred from schools into juvenile justice agencies, where some end up on probation, or even secure detention facilities for relatively minor, nonviolent infractions" (Schiff, 2013, p. 2).

**White Privilege-** “Opposition to non-white, an opposition that also marked a boundary between privilege and its opposite. Only those deemed white were worthy of entry into our community” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 13).

**Zero Tolerance Policies-** “suspension and expulsion from public education institutions, including non-violent behavior infractions such as possessing drugs or weapons, frequently resulting in placement into the juvenile justice system” (Kafka, 2011, p. 2).

### **Methodology Rationale**

My qualitative study is an autoethnography, so I could engage in reflexive journaling and narrative writing as I process the information and emotions as I discovered difficult truths about myself and my teaching. “One purpose of narrative is to redirect the dominant gaze, to make it see from a new point of view what has been there all along” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 4). Awareness that hard truths may come to light throughout this process is necessary for independent growth, and allowed me to analyze interactions and relationships through the lens of Critical Whiteness Studies. Positionality then became “a perspective that must be disclosed; it identifies the frame in which researchers, practitioners, and policy makers present their data, interpretations, and analysis” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 6). “Positionality is a core principle of multiculturalism and is, in a similar way, a central tenet of critical race theory” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, pp. 6-7).

“Everyone loves a story” (Chang, 2008, p. 5). My goal is that, through detailed narratives that described my journey in becoming anti-racist, readers, most importantly White educators will begin to understand and identify what microaggressions look like

and how we can do better with providing an anti-racist educational experience for all children of color. “Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 49).

Being a White woman of privilege, I am unable to fully comprehend Black students’ experiences, but through the use of autoethnography I narrated my personal journey in trying to become an anti-racist educator. I also provided readers with transformational moments where Black colleagues provided me with gentle corrections and explanations of how my behavior was potentially harmful to students of color in my classroom. “Understanding the relationship between self and others is one of the tasks auto-ethnographers may undertake” (Chang, 2008, p. 29). This autoethnography included my personal narratives, including reflections as I examined my primary research questions. Those reflections guided my narrative stories.

**Research Questions:**

1. Where were the points of inflection in my ongoing journey towards becoming an anti-racist educator?
2. How will I continue the trajectory towards developing an anti-racist mindset?

By documenting and describing my learning continua through unsettling personal experience and thoughts, I analyzed and dissected inflection points of learning. This information aided my understanding on how White educators can strive toward anti-racist teaching. These unintended, yet detrimental microaggressions needed to be examined in order to facilitate ongoing personal growth. My analysis and subsequent personal growth

could enlighten others, thus making tiny, but meaningful changes in promoting anti-bias teaching to all ethnicities. According to Chang (2008),

Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory and memory opens the door to the richness of the past. As an auto-ethnographer, you not only have a privileged access to your past experiences and personal interpretations of those experiences, but also have first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study. What is recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data (p. 74).

In this autoethnography, I shared detailed, meaningful experiences that have allowed me to self-reflect and analyze my thoughts and opinions through the lens of a White female teacher who has had the opportunity to educate diverse groups of students from a multitude of countries and cultures. Through the process of writing, reflection, misunderstanding and consequential vulnerability I attempted to share my innermost thoughts about student inequity in the elementary setting and the path I have taken toward becoming an advocate for student equity through liberatory teaching practices. I am hoping my work, along with the work of other anti-racist teachers, professors, and activists, will result in more White educators beginning the process of self-realization and the powerful part they can take in the liberation and equity for students of color in the elementary classroom. “In schools committed to racial equity, educators who resist anti-racist measures should feel uneasy, and isolated on the outskirts of their schools’ institutional cultures” (Gorski, 2019, p. 56). Through knowledge comes power, and

power allows for the change in trajectory in which Black students can receive the same equitable and appropriate education White students receive.

Inequities exist in our nation, and schools need to be one of the first places we address it. It is imperative colleges offer curricula designed to aggressively attack the issue of racism and teacher bias, so new teachers are sent into the workforce with the knowledge and skills to understand themselves, their students, and recognize personal biases. Current and preservice White teachers would benefit from extensive training and consulting on best practices when addressing behavior concerns through a non-oppressive lens, where understanding cultural competency and trauma is the driving force (Matias, 2016). My deep desire is to collaborate with other educators to create college courses on how to identify multiple facets of White privilege in society. That collaboration could facilitate discussions focusing on how White privilege permeates public education for children of color, and results in irreversible harm. How can college students studying teaching be expected to commit to anti-racism and racial justice if they cannot: “(1) feel their emotions, (2) recognize their emotions, (3) understand where these emotions stem, nor (4) develop the emotional ovaries to withstand the ups and downs of discussing race?” (Matias, 2016, p. 3). Through the ability to identify and understand White privilege, college students will be able to begin implementing change in their work environments and social interactions to start to shift the trajectory of racism and inequity in our communities. This is just one academic avenue that could increase awareness through intensive reading and discussion of texts from Black scholars who provocatively tease out the uncomfortable realities of White behavior and address how those behaviors directly affect Black students and families.

Teacher education will require a seismic shift and difficult race conversations are desperately needed to save our children from being funneled out of the learning trajectory. My future research will be dedicated to making changes in education so all children will have equal rights to learn, and educators will have the support and knowledge to fight injustice within their schools. This is a massive undertaking, as schools continue to be plagued with social justice issues which create a direct obstacle for student learning and success (Love, 2020).

Throughout my graduate and doctoral journey, I have had the opportunity to read a number of eye-opening texts written by Black scholars such as Audre Lorde, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Jamila Lyiscott and Brittney Cooper, all of whom effectively share their experiences and personal vantage points that I as a White woman had never considered. Because of the high number of White teachers and professors in education, there is a disproportionate amount of minority representation when educating teachers (Matias, 2016). This is one of the driving forces for my continued research on how to combat educational disparity by teaching educators how to identify systemic racism, interrogate their White privilege, and make significant changes to their discipline and teaching strategies to provide equal opportunity so all students can learn and realize success in the school setting. By starting with public education, I hope to change the trajectory of how students of color are taught and disciplined. This shift of acquiring a liberatory education with unbiased discipline, and teaching to the needs of the student with cultural understanding at the forefront, could begin to create a stop flow in the school-to-prison pipeline.



Not only do students of color represent the high end of discipline infractions (Gonzalez, 2015), but they also run the risk of being placed in a classroom of a teacher who hones in on cultural behaviors and often disciplines without a solid understanding of who the student is (Gorski, 2019). Throughout my career I have been blessed to collaborate and teach beside a number of Black educators. Courageous conversations have allowed me to face my beliefs and examine my biases; unless one is willing to admit bias there is no room for making a change. Black colleagues I have had the opportunity to learn with and from frequently described the deep need to protect Black and Brown students from particular White colleagues. By putting aside my original bruised feelings I began to find out why. Not only had I been witnessing the mistreatment and discipline discrepancies of our minority students, but my Black colleagues had as well. Their emotional reaction was different from mine. Theirs was one of fierce protection along with a deep desire to make sure minority children were shielded from particular White staff members, like the White male principal who would suspend Black male students with zero explanation, or the young White teacher who sent the talkative Black child into the hallway for hours on end, thus dismissing them from the classroom community and cheating them of essential educational instruction. When children do not fit the ideal mold of what a learner should look and sound like, many of these children are referred to Special School District with a preconceived diagnosis of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder), or ED (Emotionally Disturbed) (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This can lead to children being medicated to the point of numbness, or having to leave the general education classroom for special education resource minutes. When parents fight the

system that labels their unconventional student, school personnel often target children and push for suspension, which begins to clear the path from school to prison (Love, 2020).

Throughout my career in education I believed myself to be anti-racist. However, there were monumental events that changed the way I began to truly analyze the possible anti-Blackness in myself, and the impact that was having on the children in attendance. Once my eyes were opened to the severity of educational disparities in my environment, I began to reflect upon past experience that included my Black colleagues, and how they reacted to particular situations that were no doubt hurtful to them and our students. I became intensely focused on examining my personal experiences, thoughts and feelings in relation to microaggressions I had mistakenly inflicted in the realm of the school building, which defined me as a “Becky” (Matias, 2020). Heightened awareness of my personal behavior and reactions left me discombobulated and deeply bothered in a way I was unable to pinpoint. Considering my White upbringing and White teacher training the discomfort was a new and unique emotion for me, and one I became determined to investigate.

I had an intense desire to bring these narratives to light and utilize my anti-racist process, which continues to manifest, to explain my personal understanding of White teacher bias. I hope to provide an anti-racist educational experience for my students of color, while using that knowledge to facilitate conversations with my White colleagues on how to begin essential personal interrogation on one’s White bias and privilege in order to begin the journey of becoming an anti-racist teacher for our minority children

being set up for failure in a system that promises them a comprehensive and fair education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Social Justice**

Throughout my career as an elementary teacher I have witnessed a plethora of situations that have caused me to question the equity of minority students in public education. As an educator, I have learned firsthand social justice problems occur when inequitable treatment happens amongst a group of individuals who legally should have equitable access to job opportunities, independent earning potential and societal privileges (Drewery, 2014). “Social justice is delineated into two separate, but co-dependent categories” (Pachamama Alliance, 2019, p. 1). This includes “Intersocial Treatment, which is based on personally held biases, and include race, gender, and mental or physical abilities, as well as Unequal Government Regulation, which limits or denies groups’ access to the same opportunities and resources relative to the rest of society” (Pachamama Alliance, 2019, p. 2). One of the most recognized models of social justice is Rawls’ (1972) “justice as fairness” (p. 2). “This form of justice, commonly called distributive justice, is the idea about principles for sharing wealth and resources among diverse members of communities” (Drewery, 2014, p. 196). Persistent disadvantages afforded to students of color in the realm of public education continues to follow the historical trajectory of inequitable discipline for identical infractions of White students in the classroom (Schiff, 2013). This directly correlates to missed educational opportunities and valuable learning time, which continue to contribute to the already wide learning gap prevalent between students of color and White students (Gonzalez, 2015). “The idea of social justice must begin with the expectation of inclusion, rather

than exclusion,” (Drewery, 2014, p. 201) which continues to persist in public education and directly affects children’s ability to receive an equitable education.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

In order to fully understand the underpinnings of educational inequity, one must take a hard look at Whiteness and how White teachers continue to oppress students of color with their unwillingness to dissect their inner bias (Matias, 2016). Matias (2016), a woman of color and proclaimed mother scholar, delves deeply into Whiteness and its devastating impact on students of Color, especially since approximately 85% of teachers in the United States identify as White females, many of which claim to be colorblind in their interactions with minority students. The more I become immersed in the lived experiences of minorities in public education, the more I witness the problem lies within White teacher’s inability to identify with and break away from the privilege that comes with being White, along with the emotionality that must be confronted and changed in order to best educate students of color.

When looking at race in public education, Dumas (2014) explains,

I contend here that, for many Black children and families in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, schooling is a site for suffering. Schooling is *not merely* a site of suffering, but I believe it is the suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to in educational scholarship, and more specifically, in educational policy analysis. (p. 2).

This suffering has played out in a myriad of ways at the hands of White teachers, from zero tolerance discipline policies (Lustick, 2017) which opened the school-to-prison pipeline for minority students (Schiff, 2013), to the implementation of school desegregation policies in the 1980s and 1990s.

For many Black families, educators and activists, desegregation and subsequent racial equity policies have become specific sites of a specific form of school malaise, in which the possibility of educational access and opportunity seems increasingly, and even intentionally elusive, even as the hegemonic and seemingly undeniable ‘common sense’ is that schools are the sure pathway in improved life chances, not only for individual Black subjects, but for the Black collective, the race, as a whole (Dumas, 2014, p. 3).

Even though the goal continues to get Black and Brown students accepted into high level institutions, which function under a primarily White umbrella, great suffering continues to plague those from deeply segregated communities once they become embedded in the educational experience. “In order to survive predominantly White schools, people of color know intuitively that access means assimilation and that excellence means erasure of the self” (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 70).

All too often my White colleagues, and even myself at one point, have stated their deep seeded desire to save urban children. This misguided White Savior complex (Matias, 2016) has caused repeated harm to children all over America. Minority students don’t need saving by White societal views; they need equitable supplies, facilities, and access to higher level curriculum, which is continuously held from them by White

districts and families who demand their children have full access to the best of what public education has to offer. This is made possible by the hidden curriculum White parents are privy to, allowing for actively lobbying for honors and advanced placement courses, which boasts 90% White attendance, for their children, where basic classes are primarily comprised of Black and Latino students. (Diamond & Lewis, 2015). This opportunity hoarding by White families directly contrasts the narrative of wanting diverse populations for their children. When asked, White parents admitted to recognizing the inequities of colored students in public education. They are, however, remiss to act, hence protecting their White privilege with obvious awareness how the system benefits their students (Diamond & Lewis, 2015). Along with the burden of fighting the system, minority students also explained feeling unseen when they were in higher level courses, sharing the need to introduce themselves to teachers to verify seriousness in their education. The burden of acting White to fit in and have academic success was a daily experience (Diamond & Lewis, 2015).

Whiteness and privilege become starkly apparent when Whites are asked to participate in race conversations when repressed feelings to a colored face reminds them of their White guilt (Matias, 2016). I've lost count of the times I have witnessed White educators claim race is not an issue or I don't see race, while being colorblind to race is the issue. The fear of being called racist is very real for Whites, and comments like I never owned slaves are commonplace in higher educational dialogue. These individuals repel feelings of guilt, being blamed, and becoming uncomfortable in true race conversations. Their fears are based on White sensibilities, or sentiments of discomfort, whereas people of Color fear tangible repercussions such as job loss, physical threats, and

ostracism (Matias, 2016). DiAngelo and Sensoy (2012) argue that “the fears held by Whites are not equivalent to the real fears of people of Color because the latter’s fears are produced by the historical surveillance of people of Color under a system of racism” (p. 117). “In fact, the authors point out how Whites believe racism against Whites is *more prevalent* than racism against Blacks, a mal-informed response to their unsubstantiated fear” (Matias, 2016, pp. 14-15). Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) theory of colorblind racism unveils how “Whites teeter between rhetorical arguments based on their dominant racial frame, where this exasperated concern is often a rhetorical response, one which we coin an emotional diminutive that strategically masks a deep- rooted disgust for African Americans” (p. 66).

Matias (2016) further explains,

This can be portrayed in comments such as referring to African Americans as them, displaying pity for the type of life they live, which appears to be a more socially acceptable emotion, but that still objectifies the Black Other, while deflecting racist implications (p. 25).

Yet when faced with the reality of racist actions, White women frequently revert to tears (Matias, 2020). “One need not look any further that the murder of a fourteen-year-old African American boy, Emmett Till, to realize this murderous reality” (Matias, 2020, p. 2).

In her book *Surviving Becky’s*, Matias (2020) describes collecting a number of fan fiction narratives to “examine the deleterious impact of how whiteness entangled with dynamics of gender, femininity, and innocence embodied in the white women negatively impacts folks of color” (p. 2). Privilege in Whiteness directly correlates to the oppression



of people of color, where many Black and Brown students drop out of school because the lack of understanding and authentic care from teachers in a White educational system (Matias, 2016). Since 2001, academic scholars have discussed the overwhelming presence of Whiteness in the field of education, as well as teacher education (Sleeter, 1993).

When analyzing the motives of White teachers who express a desire to enter into urban-focused programs, it is imperative to question why they feel the need to give back to these urban students. Many believe they will experience a sense of fulfillment by creating friendships with their new Black students (Matias, 2016). “Such a friendship will at once solidify the colonizer/colonized (teacher/student) relationship while perpetuating their safety in whiteness by not fully confronting it” (Matias, 2016, p. 93). This is dangerous on many levels, as not only does it continue a cycle of oppression, but it leads to White emotionality when students do not conform to the preconceived ideals these teachers have in mind.

Microaggressions may be one of the most detrimental behaviors enacted by Whites toward Black individuals. Maya Angelou viewed them “as everyday slights and indignities to little murders as distinct from the grand execution hate crimes” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 4). In her poetry *Still I Rise* she utilizes her voice to communicate deep hurt and pain caused by microaggressions in the curriculum taught in schools, as well verbal and nonverbal harm (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). While this study is focusing primarily on how racial microaggressions cause harm to Black students, “microaggressions can be expressed toward any marginalized group in our society. They can be linked to racism, sexism, genderism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of

oppression” (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008, p. 118). Pierce (1970) defined microaggressions as “subtle insults, (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Pierce, 1970, p. 515).

This term often causes confusion amongst White individuals who fail to understand the severe repercussions these unnoticed microaggressions have on Black bodies. “Micro does not refer to being innocuous but rather underscores the interpersonal, microlevel contest of the act. Microaggressions denote some sort of interpersonal interaction involving a perpetrator and targeted marginalized group member” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 7). When studying the word aggression, one tends to immediately think of a violent act that intends harm to another individual. “Some forms of aggression, indirect, social, and relational, may exclude others or harm their reputations, with or without intention to do so” (Archer & Coyne, 2005, p. 219). These microaggressions can “take shape as insults, invalidations, or assaults” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 8). Whether these verbal or nonverbal microaggressions are intended or unintended, they cause harm to the individual. “These brief and commonplace indignities communicate hostile, derogatory and/or negative slights to the target” (Sue, Capodilupo, et.al., 2007, p. 74). “Microaggressions theory values the target’s perception in identifying harm, as perpetrators often are unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the target” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 8).

One microaggression is not impactful in its singularity, but years of accumulated experiences can be extremely detrimental to an individual (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). “Many White individuals, for example, fail to realize that people of color are, from the moment of birth, subjected to multiple microaggressions from the media, peers,

neighbors, friends, teachers, and even the educational process and/or curriculum itself” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 8). These microaggressions and everyday racism occur on a daily basis for people of color and “are manifestations of systemic inequities in the larger society like income, wealth, education, and health disparities” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 9). Microaggressions can only be sustained in an environment with “institutional inequalities grounded in the cultural superiority of the dominant group” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 9).

“Racism may be defined as any attitude, action, institutional structure, or social policy that subordinates persons or groups because of their racial group membership. The complex manifestation of racism occurs at three different levels” (Jones, 1997, p. 3). Unfortunately, these microaggressions often stem from individual racism, which is “best known to the American public as overt, conscious, and deliberate individual acts intended to harm, place at a disadvantage, or discriminate against racial minorities” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 9). “Institutional racism refers to a policy, practice, procedure, or structure in business, government, courts, schools and the like by which decisions and actions unfairly subordinate persons of color while allowing White individuals to profit from the outcome” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 10). This can be seen in the way discipline is managed as evidenced by discipline disparities between Black students and their White counterparts (Schiff, 2013). “Microaggressions are manifest in the biased attitudes and behaviors of individuals” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 10). This can be witnessed in public schools across America with White teachers and their interactions with Black students (Matias, 2016). “Cultural racism is perhaps the most insidious and damaging form of racism because it serves as an overarching umbrella under which

individual and institutional racism thrive” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 11). This is prevalent in today’s schools as White teachers expect all students, no matter their race or culture, to acculturate to their White standards for learning and behavior. When compliance does not occur, students of color are often sent out of the learning environment, which results in a direct loss of learning and instruction. “Cultural racism is defined as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group’s cultural heritage over another group’s and the power to impose those standards on other groups” (Sue, 2004, p. 760). This not only robs students of color of their educational rights, but is a direct reflection of the White educator’s beliefs and value system being foisted onto the student. This behavior directly correlates with White superiority and serves to feed the school-to- prison pipeline (Gonzalez, 2015).

“Because Whites thus live in a world they do not understand, their exposure to the viewpoints of people of color can trigger powerful emotions, ranging from denial, anger, and defensiveness to shock, surprise, and sadness” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 6). It was imperative I used reflexive journaling as I processed the information and at times difficult emotions that accompanied my journey of in-depth research while discovering harsh truths about myself and my teaching. “One purpose of narrative is to redirect the dominant gaze, to make it see from a new point of what has been there all along” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 4). Awareness that ugly truths could come to light throughout this process and accepting that reality is necessary for independent growth, so that interactions and relationships with students of color can be modified to provide them an anti-racist education. Positionality then becomes “a perspective that must be disclosed; it identifies the frame of which researchers,

practitioners, and policy makers present their data, interpretations, and analysis” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 6). “Positionality is a core principle of multiculturalism and is, in a similar way, a central tenet of Critical Race Theory” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, pp. 6-7). In order to fully understand the counter story of Critical Race Theory, researchers can use Critical Whiteness Studies to support Critical Race Theory to aid in the deconstruction of White minds (Matias, 2014, p. 289). In regards to how the White imagination operates one must look at the “emotional disinvestment, lack of critical understanding of race, resurgence of white guilt and recycling of hegemonic whiteness,” (Matias, 2014, p. 289) which negatively impacts students of color in the classroom (Matias, 2014). As supporting information to the Theoretical Lens of Critical Whiteness Studies in this study, it is significant to discuss and understand Critical Race Theory.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is defined by Taylor, Gillborn and Ladson Billings (2009) as “the study of racism and its effects on People of Color” (p. 16). When Black families are encouraged to establish trust in American institutions like public education, there inevitably is baggage that accompanies that trust. Alfred (2018) states, “the political structures and social norms dictate how one should govern their behavior when participating in the institutional structure. The American education system, even at the elementary level, is no different” (p. 18). Alfred (2018) further explains that as a Black woman in education, “there are spoken and unspoken rules that dictate what is and is not acceptable. This is how building culture and norms are established and enacted” (Alfred,

2018, p. 18). Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009) state, “when race comes into the picture, the rules are viewed a little differently” (p. 21). To be considered fair, “a system must offer its citizens equal opportunities for public recognition, and groups cannot systematically suffer from misrecognition in the form of stereotype and stigma” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 37). When analyzing the treatment of Black students in public education through the lens of CRT, one could argue that individuals of color have yet to be granted citizenship.

Unlike some academic scholarships, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain...

Critical Race Theory contains an activist dimension. It tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better. (p. 8).

“Applying CRT in education makes it possible to analyze practices and ideologies through a race-conscious lens, which can help frame critical questions addressing the traumas that directly affect communities of color” (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 494). McGee and Stovall, (2015) explain, “CRT offers itself as a theoretical and methodological paradigm aimed at the examination and elimination of race, class, and gender oppression” (p. 494). This is paramount when critiquing the behavior of White educators toward their Black students in the attempt to provide an equal and meaningful educational experience for all students. This includes and highlights the issues of discipline disparity in which Black and Latino children were disciplined at double the rate of their White counterparts for the same offense (Hefling, 2014). Being able to fully comprehend the role of student race in the racial achievement gap requires a significant

understanding of how race had been the consistent fabric of oppression since the 1800's when slavery was commonplace, as "racialization led not only to the formation of the entrenched cultural belief system that suggested some people were essentially different (and better) than others" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 61). Recognizing that this White supremacy logic has created a system of oppression in educational environments, it is imperative to address the impact on race relations where individuals make assumptions and generalizations based on racial norms and stereotypes.

Taylor, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2009) explain CRT as:

Critical Race Theory cannot be understood as an abstract set of ideas of doctrines. Its scholarship, however is marked by a number of specific insights and observations, including society's acceptance of racism as ordinary, the phenomenon of Whites allowing Black progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the importance of understanding the historic effects of European colonialism, and the preference of the experiences of oppressed peoples narrative over the objective opinions of Whites (p. 4).

The idea that racism is considered normal because of the prevalence throughout America's history is alarming and oftentimes overlooked or denied. "Hence, as Critical Race Theory so asserts, the dynamics of race did not just disappear with the changing, modern times" (Matias, 2016, p. 16). "Racial inequity and discrimination in matters such as hiring, housing, criminal sentences, education, and lending are so widespread as to be uninteresting and of little to no concern to most Whites," (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 18) as it interferes so little with their daily lives. "Until a White person

truly sees the dehumanization process of investing in their whiteness, standing before them will always be a person of Color who is demoralized by it" (Matias, 2016, p. 84).

### **Educational Disparity in History**

Racial disparity is an ongoing pattern of behavior that has dominated our societal structure for hundreds of years and continues its prevalence today (Hunt & Morice, 2008). Comprehending the role of race in the achievement gap mandates one to delve into the educational history of the United States, as "race had been a fundamental organizing principle since before the country's founding, racialization led not only to the formation of the entrenched cultural belief system that suggested some people were essentially different, and better, than others" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 5) This provides insight into how individuals of color experienced inequitable opportunities that spanned "across a myriad of avenues that not only included homeownership and job opportunities, but educational experiences as well" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 39). Instead of analyzing the public education culture and how that directly affects students of color, predominantly White teaching staff (Matias, 2016) prefer to deflect and accept the frequent claims that Black and Latino students perform at academic levels subpar to their White counterparts because of a lack of effort or personal investment in their education (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This mantra contributes to creating an inequitable environment for all students in public education, and becomes glaringly obvious in inequitable discipline, academic tracking, and student's overall school experience (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). School districts continue to target their focus on domineering White based curriculum in preparation for standardized state testing, where White students



continuously outperform their Black and Latino counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This disparity continues to exist in discipline and suspension rates, which begs one to question what is going wrong in public education (Lustick, 2015).

Educational disparity is deeply entrenched in our nation's history, as far back at the 1800's and is part of the very fabric of public education in the United States, as it was illegal to educate Black individual during slavery (Hunt & Morice, 2008).

Between 1865 and 1893, the Missouri General Assembly passed laws creating segregated schools which were established for *black schools only*. These schools had an attendance threshold to allow them to operate. If, in any month, attendance fell below the minimum number, the black school had to close for up to six months (Hunt & Morice, 2008, p. 234).

This was commonplace, as "55% of Black Missourians had moved to the cities, seeking higher wages, shorter work hours, and improved educational opportunities" (Hunt & Morice, 2008, p. 243). Attendance minimums were frequently not achieved in many areas, directly resulting in the loss of educational opportunity for a multitude of Black students. In 1890, "70.8% of Missouri's eligible Black youth were enrolled in public schools, but only 55.05% were enrolled in 1899, since they often relocated to urban areas" (Hunt & Morice, 2008, p. 243).

In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racially segregated schools were legal, contingent on facilities and resources being equal for both White and Black students (Anderson, 1988). Even though resources were not equal for Black students, schooling opportunities increasingly developed for Blacks through persistent individual and collective self-determination (Anderson, 1988). Importantly, public school

growth for Blacks largely existed as an element of steadfast toil and resilience (Davis, 2019). These burgeoning schools remained cocooned within Black communities, operated with minimal oversight (or simple surveillance) of White observers, and, most importantly, served as sights of public deliberation, a rhetorical enterprise routinely denied to Blacks in public settings (Black Public Collective, 1995).

Segregated schools for Blacks regularly faced enormous challenges (Walker, 1996), while simultaneously striving to keep as much of the classroom work untainted by White surveillance as possible (Davis, 2019). Throughout varying circumstances of freedom, these institutions maintained a modicum, at least, of what one scholar termed a second curriculum, one in which Black consciousness animated the learning experienced by Black students (Favors, 2019). These schools served as centerpieces to the “robust Black civic and social life beyond the White gaze” (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 16).

The reality of self-possessed Black schooling came to an abrupt halt following the historic decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* issue on May 17, 1954, when Earl Warren stated “in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place, as segregated schools are inherently unequal” (Anderson, 2016, p. 76). As a result, the plaintiffs were being “deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment” (Anderson, 2016, p. 76). Black schools were longer left to their own administrations, but were placed under surveillance in regards to testing measures and school accountability.

In conjunction with these changes, Black administrators and teachers were driven out of schools in large numbers, leaving vast numbers of Black school leaders unemployed (Tillman, 2004). As reformers moved to take over the failing Black schools

in the spirit of rebuilding, many experienced and dedicated Black teachers were discarded and replaced with White teachers who touted culturally relevant pedagogy (Henry, 2016).

As White supremacy infiltrated Black schools with its curriculum mandates and testing protocols, many cities began the torturous experiments in school desegregation.

Predominantly Black students were offered the opportunity to be bused out of their urban home schools to wealthier, White privileged schools. Though these numbers were restricted, students clamored to board the bus before sunrise to ride for hours at a time to receive an equal education. Once there, Black students experienced bullying and systemic racism by White students and teachers (Diamond & Lewis, 2015). Busing also added a layer of difficulty for children interested in immersion in extracurricular sports, as dependency on bussing eliminated the opportunity for participation, unless personal transportation was arranged. Bussed students frequently lamented their inability to participate in sports and extracurriculars because of lack of transportation.

Microaggressions masked as innocent questioning surrounding the lack of participation wore on Black students who even felt the pressure to mask the daily racialized interactions to shield their parents (Ming, 2015). Black parents also dealt with the inability to attend conferences and school events that were made unavailable to them and their children because of dependency on busing. This further reinforced the educational White narrative that Black families were not invested in education (Matias, 2016).

For students who remained behind in their urban home schools, new hyper-surveillance accountability measures threatened to hold these now integrated schools accountable for learning in schools that were not designed for them. The New Jim Code (Benjamin, 2019) was developed within the racialized crisis and contextualized along

with White supremacy to create newly developed accountability methods that served to highlight student inequities with the focus on Black student failure. Even in light of inequitable facilities, resources, and curriculum access, supposed colorblind policies continue to batter students and staff in majority Black schools (Davis, 2019). Majority Black school districts all across the country have continued to experience de-accreditation in light of policies that attempt to treat all students equally (Tate et al, 2015). Schools that serve predominantly Black student populations continue to be “funded less equitably than schools serving White students” (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 16). “These schools are less likely to have advanced academic courses, proper school supplies, and equipment, and more likely to have overcrowded classrooms and facilities in need of repair” (Dumas, 2009, p. 94). As of today, underfunded and urban school districts continue to suffer a lack of Black administrators, staff and culturally relevant curriculum (Gordon, 2019). With the desegregation program halted and the last of the students grandfathered in now graduating, Black students continue to deal with frequent staff turnover, school closings and a never-ending battle for equal rights compared to their highly funded suburban neighbors (Gordon, 2019).

### **Discipline Disparities and The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

As minority discipline issues in public education increased under the new Jim Crow integration law, White educators began to struggle for classroom control with the current discipline policies. Discipline reform in the 1960s and 1970s became focused on students of color and their specific behavior concerns, with newly integrated schools located in large urban cities like New York and Los Angeles, and comprised of high

Black and Latino student populations (Kafka, 2011). White middle-class teachers, who were the predominant teaching staff, increasingly reported to White male administrators they were unable to educate or control their minority students (Kafka, 2011). “White administrators and teachers were ill prepared to address the racial climate in their schools, and often failed to recognize or nurture the academic abilities of Black children” (Dumas, 2014, p. 5). The campaign for zero tolerance discipline primarily framed the White teacher’s struggle with ineffective and culturally unresponsive discipline strategies, with evidence that minority students could not be controlled or educated within the current discipline mandates. Instead, discipline policies and practices changed to cater to White teachers, while racism and culturally relevant teaching strategies went unexamined, which directly correlated to racially inequitable discipline for students of color (Lustick, 2015).

“Zero tolerance policy enactment, suspension, and expulsion rates have increased exponentially across all student populations, and especially for students of color and students with disabilities” (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2012, p. 8). “The history of zero tolerance policies led to the gradual dissolution of the school discipline doctrine known as *in loco parentis*, which had allowed teachers and principals to discipline as they saw fit” (Kafka, 2011, p. 1). In the wake of increased crime and school violence in the 1960s and 1970s teachers’ unions, parents, and administrators fought for more mandatory, centralized and bureaucratic discipline policies, known as zero tolerance, to deal with the increased violence and classroom disruptions (Allman & Slate, 2011). Through these new “zero tolerance policies, a term borrowed from the anti-drug laws” (Kafka, 2011, p. 2) and increased social control, the Gun-Free Schools Act was passed, which “required

schools to expel any student found in possession of a gun (later modified to include any weapon) for one calendar year, and refer such students to the juvenile justice system” (Kafka, 2011, p. 2) Police presence increased in public schools from elementary, middle and high schools, and school officials implemented camera surveillance along with metal detectors at all building doors (Lustick, 2015). Zero tolerance policies widened the previously existing racial “discipline gap” in American schooling (Gregory & Mosely, 2004) which is documented as early as Pre-Kindergarten (Lustick, 2017).

The history of zero tolerance discipline policies and racial disproportionality in discipline often places the focus on policy, while skirting the reality of school-level practice (Lustick, 2017). The increase in student suspension rates may explain the widening discipline gap, however it fails to explain the racial discipline gap that previously existed before the zero tolerance policies were in place, which dates back to the integration of students of color with White students (Gregory et al., 2014) “Discipline both implicitly and explicitly meant something different for students of color than for White students” (Lustick, 2017, p. 121). For example, students of color were more likely to be placed in special education classes with behavior disabilities, since they were thought to be unable to acculturate to school because of unruly and untamed behavior, which could be taught through strict discipline strategies in those specific settings (Kafka, 2011). A study in 2000 shows little to no progress has been made in the attempt to close the racial discipline disparity gap. “Nationally, Black students represented 17% of public-school enrollment, but accounted for 34% of suspensions, while special education students represented 8.6% of school youth, but accounted for 32% of youth in juvenile detention” (Schiff, 2013, p. 5). Black students in special

education were three times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts with the same placement, and are four times more likely to be put in juvenile detention. (Schiff, 2013). “Black students made up 15% of the total student population in the government civil rights data from 2011 to 2012, but made up more than a third of students suspended once,” (Schiff, 2013, p. 5) Of those students, 44% were suspended more than once and more than a third of students were expelled, illustrating minuscule progress is being made (Schiff, 2013). Schools with higher suspension rates in students of color also reported significantly lower levels of academic engagement and higher drop-out rates (Gregory et al. 2014), which directly feeds into the school-to-prison pipeline (Gonzalez, 2015).

Public school districts continue to show continued discipline disparities involving students of color and their White counterparts (Matias, 2016). “Research indicates that punitive sanctions may be driving students- particularly minority and poor students- out of school altogether, resulting in a school-to-prison pipeline” (Losen, 2014. p. 61). Gregory et al. (2014) cite “a Texas district that found African American students were 26.2% more likely to receive out of school suspension for their first offense compared to 9.9% of White students” (p. 4). This data shows minority students are suspended almost three times more than their White counterparts. “Students who are suspended, all things being equal, are more at risk for poor attendance, inability to progress to the next grade, failure to graduate, and subsequent involvement in the juvenile and adult justice systems” (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 17) which drastically increases the likelihood of entering the school-to-prison pipeline (WestED Justice & Prevention Center, 2016).

With schools under federal pressure to alleviate racial discipline disparities, stopping the flow of the school-to-prison pipeline by addressing Black and Latino student dropout has become a goal of many school administrators across the country (Lustick, 2015). Data released by The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights has shown disparities in discipline with Black and Brown skinned students versus that of White students cause minority students to be suspended or expelled more frequently with the data showing suspension rates for African American at 10.42%, Latino 4.74%, and White 2.28% (Gonzalez, 2015). In a desperate attempt to reverse the trajectory of many at-risk students, school districts have begun to employ the use of restorative discipline as an intervention strategy to avoid suspensions and expulsions (Lustick, 2015).

### **Restorative Discipline Intervention**

As educational disparities remain a focus of public-school administrators, discipline disparities continue to plague children, directly affecting their educational value (Pearman, et.al, 2019). In an attempt to actively combat the issue, administrators are “under increasing pressure, and continued threat of federal investigation, to implement alternative methods of non-punitive discipline, known generally as positive discipline practices, such as restorative discipline” (Lustick, 2015, p. 301). The intervention of restorative discipline, or sometimes called restorative justice, was derived from the prisoner rehabilitation intervention originally founded and used in New Zealand with individuals of the prison system (Drewery, 2014). The need originated in 2003 when the country of New Zealand was faced with an abnormally large population of 51% Maori prisoners inhabiting the justice system for petty crimes while representing only



15% of the population, which placed them at risk for later unemployment and health issues (Drewery, 2014). Further research showed 80% of the juvenile population was youth who had dropped out of the schooling system, thus creating a focus on the correlation of school failure to prison (Drewery, 2014). Through restorative practices, the relationships between teachers and the Maori students were studied in an attempt to change the trajectory of negative outcomes. This New Zealand flagship program claimed significant success in improving student success through “a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations’ defined thus: when educators create learning contexts within their classroom; where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations interdependence; where culture counts; where learning is interactive, dialogic and spirals” (Drewery, 2014, pp. 193-194), and students feel connected through a common and shared vision, which promotes positive educational outcomes and sense of community (Gonzalez, 2015).

A number of components make up the variety of interventions that can be used in restorative practices. Restorative conferences, or otherwise termed restorative circles (WestEd Justice & Prevention Center, 2016) “employ processes such as the inclusion of the voice of the victim and members of the communities of both or all parties in a facilitated conversations, within a framework of respect for all those involved, manifested as a right to speak and be heard” (Drewery, 2014, p. 194). This process is put in place to produce a common understanding of the harm done and how it directly affected the victim, with the goal of allowing the perpetrator to collaborate with the victim on how to repair the harm caused (Drewery, 2014). The psychological advantages to these practices are viewed as a cognitive development process in which offenders are held responsible

for their actions, along with recognizing an obligation to repair the harm caused, while learning to manage the social risk of everyday life outside of the prison system (Drewery, 2014).

Restorative practices with the purpose of improving learning outcomes for disparate students fall within the framework of social justice with the tenant belief that educational status provides access to a multitude of socio-economic opportunities, which include job, housing and societal respect (Drewery, 2014). While a transformative change in behavior is the desired outcome, the real objective is to improve social relations among all involved individuals. Another tenant of restorative practices as it pertains to the educational system is to produce citizens who are “confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners” (Drewery, 2014, p. 196). Recognition of human dignity is one of the main pillars of restorative justice. Zehr (2002) maintains in his book that principles include “maintaining or restoring respectful relationship, peaceful resolution of conflict and making amends, rather than working out who is to blame and meeting out appropriate punishment, although punishment is not precluded from the process” (p. 7). Through this work, schools and communities can learn about individual cultures and enable classroom teachers to work with diverse populations in an effective, culturally responsive manner. Restorative practices strive to restore equilibrium to the community and build social capital with improved student academic performance while promoting a safe and equitable environment for all learners (Gonzalez, 2015).

Restorative circles can also be informally utilized to give students the opportunity for collaboration, student voice and choice and discussion in a secure and nonjudgmental environment (Gonzalez, 2015). Circles can be introduced into the regular classroom

routine to serve a variety of purposes, including “conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making, information exchange and relationship development” (Wachtel, 2013, p. 7). Gonzalez (2015) explains informational restorative practices include affective statements that communicate individual feelings as well as emotive questions, causing others to engage in personal reflection when analyzing individual behavior and its effects on others in the classroom community. Restorative questions can be utilized to generate impromptu classroom conferences or restorative circles as needed (Wachtel, 2013). The dependable use of informal restorative circles in the classroom can forge a consistent environment which encourages and promotes awareness, empathy and personal responsibility, which is a proactive discipline measure (Ferguson & Chevannes, 2018).

Restorative practice provides an opportunity for students to experience authentic liberation from the inappropriate behavior, because the process encourages honesty, respect, and a place for acceptance. Students understand the impact of their actions and can experience transformation and modify the behavior (Wachtel, 2013, p. 5).

While restorative practices have research data to prove success in the prison system with rehabilitation of petty crime offenders (Drewery, 2014) there are mixed results in public education when analyzing the benefits of restorative practices for students who are actively caught in the school-to-prison pipeline because of multiple discipline infractions (Lustick, 2015). At first glance, restorative discipline appears to be a palatable solution for decreasing suspension and expulsions for students of color. However, there are essential components necessary for these interventions to be successful. Oftentimes students caught in the vicious cycle of discipline infractions suffer

from a deficit of emotional intelligence, which is an invaluable component of active participation in restorative circles (Zehr, 2002). The emotional intelligence of offenders and those who enter the juvenile system appear to lack multiple components comprising emotional intelligence and include, “knowing one’s emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others and handling relationships” (Zehr, 2002, p. 12). Without these key tools, individuals being asked to participate in restorative practices report feelings of confusion, anger and mistrust (Lustick, 2015). Students report having increased distrust of the process and the individuals involved, as offenders are asked to confess their transgressions along with the deeply vulnerable reasons behind their actions (Lustick, 2015). This can appear to have a confessional type quality in front of community members and peers, which Foucault (1977) likens to a catholic confessional in his book *Discipline and Punish*.

One predominant change in restorative discipline is the transfer of responsibility concerning the monitoring of student behavior, which is shifted from the primarily White teaching force and administrators to peers (Lustick, 2015). The relocation of power at the sight of transactions between individuals from student to staff to student to peers should improve relationships between students and their teachers (Foucault, 1977). Here, the organization acts much like the famous Bentham’s panopticon prison, which is circular in shape where “prisoners learn to regulate their own behaviors since not being able to see the guard keeps them on their toes” (Lustick, 2015, p. 303). The image Foucault presents is that power is no longer located within an individual, such as a teacher or administrator, or physical space, but instead distributed across all individuals of the institution (Lustick, 2015). However, the use of restorative justice, which utilizes the compass of shame as

one of its pillars of framework, can have adverse reactions. This is directed toward the offender to discipline the mind and spirit as they engage in deep reflection surrounding their discipline infraction (Lustick, 2015). However, four risks are associated with this and include lashing out to attack those victims who were harmed and came forward, attacking oneself, seeking isolation, and social avoidance in entirety (Zehr, 2002). When a restorative circle is enacted to address a behavior infraction, the offender can develop retaliatory feelings toward peers involved in determining their punishment, which can be identified as feelings of oppression from those enacting the punishment (Lustick, 2015). Not only is there often a physical consequence for the offender, but they must express guilt along with an apology to those harmed by their actions (Zehr, 2002).

A Denver Public Schools longitudinal study on the use of restorative discipline as a primary intervention to battle exponentially high suspensions and expulsions among its student population showed alarming results when the data was carefully analyzed (Gonzalez, 2015). Gonzalez (2015) explains how data results exhibited a significant decrease in suspension rates from years 2006-2013 spanning all major ethnic groups, with the greatest decrease in the Black population dropping from 17.61% to 10.42%, followed next by the Latino population which fell from 10.18% to 4.74% and White students declining from 5.88% to 2.28%, with the overall school suspension rate declining from 10.58% to 5.63%, showing an decrease by almost half, while undergoing an increased student enrollment by almost 20,000 during the span of the study. Where this is promising data in regards to effectively targeting suspensions an obvious and glaring discipline disparity between races still exists. When analyzed carefully, the data showed the discipline gap between Black and White students rose even in light of the

overall decrease in suspensions, bringing awareness to the continued discipline gap in education, even with interventions in place. This data negates the belief that restorative practices serve to close the discipline gap between students of color and their White counterparts (Gonzalez, 2015).

These results are the opposite of what schools practicing restorative discipline are looking for, and school personnel not highly trained increase the chance of misuse. This popular behavior intervention risks causing more harm to minority students, further punishing them for infractions (Zehr, 2002).

If executed correctly, restorative discipline can provide tangible benefits for school climate while providing an alternative to zero tolerance discipline policies (WestEd Justice & Prevention Center, 2016). It is imperative that educators are highly trained in the implementation of restorative practices and be diligent about reading body language to intervene when students become uncomfortable, which can lead to feelings of oppression (Lustick, 2015). Students need to be thoroughly educated about the guidelines and procedures of restorative conferences and circles so they can be conducted in a smooth, safe and non-oppressive manner for all involved participants (Schiff, 2013). Where current data reports the discipline gap among students of color and their White counterparts continues to be a severe problem plaguing public education (Gonzalez, 2015). When implemented correctly restorative practices can be utilized in reparation of student teacher relationships, which in turn fosters a more equitable and engaging educational experience.

## **Anti-Racist Teaching**

Cheryl Matias (2016) explains the importance of authentic teaching when discussing the characteristics of an anti-racist teacher...

A White teacher who truly engages in antiracism would not need to either promote her perceived Hidalguismo in teaching urban students of color or affirm her own narcissism by pegging a friend as a Black one. Further -and most importantly- a truly antiracist teacher would recognize that the relationship between White adults and children of Color is not enough to proclaim a commitment to antiracism since the power dynamic still perches White teachers over students of Color (p. 94).

By doing the necessary research needed, White women can utilize books like *Surviving Becky's* (Matias, 2020) and *Feeling White* (Matias, 2016) to recognize Whiteness characteristics that White women naturally embody to apologize and ask, how can I as a White woman do better to support individuals of color? This simple acknowledgment of their privilege and micro and macroaggressions can be the first step in the critical analysis and reflection on “racialized emotions, the ways these emotions are construed through Whiteness and how their displays may actually counteract anti-racist endeavors” (Matias, 2016, p. 26).

As educators, we must delve into internal/introspective literacy, which is described as “doing the deep self-awareness work to learn how white privilege roots itself in our very consciousness” (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 77). Lyiscott (2019) goes on to explain further:

It is impossible to do the work of acting against white privilege in the world if you are not doing the work of acting against white privilege yourself. At the level of action, internal/introspective literacy is about changing yourself in an anti-racist, pro-cultural, pluralism agent of racial justice. It means you take actions against the ideologies, institutional practices, and interpersonal reinforcements that have embedded themselves into your consciousness so that you now function in the service of white privilege, whether you are white or not (p. 78).

Institutional literacy (Lyiscott, 2019) is another crucial component where White teachers can identify White privilege in the realm of public education, and in their overall lives. This means actively restructuring, reimagining and rewriting the narrative of culturally inclusive spaces and what that looks like (Lyiscott, 2019). These spaces must become safe places where White privilege cannot survive, and children of all races are free to authentically be themselves without punishment or reprimand.

Matias (2016) significantly explores racism in teaching and how White teachers often fail to fully recognize their racist actions. Matias (2016) states,

Whites must first accept that they are, at best, antiracist white racists. Only within this detachment will whites have the opportunity to engage in the *burden of race* themselves without relying on the support and guidance from people of Color. Self-assuming the burden of race forces whites to realize their own complicity in whiteness and white supremacy (p. 94)

Teachers must also personally analyze the depth and quality of teacher and



student relationships and further investigate why as a White teacher there is such a draw to attach to students of color. Gillborn (2005) posits that,

One of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many, possibly the majority, of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness (p. 494).

This reinforces the dire need for White educators to not recognize how Whiteness weaves itself into the fabric of public education but be willing to take a firm stance against how schools operate in this Whiteness.

Using reflection and analysis of the history of race and racism, White teachers currently in the classroom or in teacher training can begin to cultivate an awareness of the lived experiences of colored individuals. Terminology such as *White supremacy*, *inferiority*, and *racial hierarchy* give an avenue to better articulate race and racism (Matias, 2016). Much like employing the theory behind the modern translation of *The Allegory of the Cave* written by Plato (1963), Whiteness can be explained:

The oppressors beat the ideas of inferiority into the oppressed until they actually believe them too which only reinforces the oppressors' feelings of superiority. Oppression and colonization are just a vicious cycle that only get worse as it continues. We justify war with racism by saying we're really just protecting you. You're too uncivilized to do it yourself (Matias, 2016, p. 147).

Until teachers can clearly see the truth in this, there is no hope for true anti-racist teaching. Whiteness cannot be ignored if the structure of racism in the classroom is to be understood and how a teacher's White identity reinforces that oppression.

Through transformative education and substantial understanding of how Whiteness affects students of color, White teachers can make aggressive moves to combat this monoculture education (Nieto & Bode, 2008) that is commonplace for students in education. Nieto and Bode (2008) describe monocultural education as "incomplete education and, if one bases one's understanding of the world on a monocultural and incomplete education, one is in fact miseducated" (p. 50). "Conversely, those who receive explicit lessons on race and racism have the ability to lift their cultural blindness and see anew" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 50). Through this process White teachers will obviously experience painful and racial dissonance to understand the color behind their racial identity and how that affects their daily teaching. This process is re-coloring their White identity, and by accepting the loss of Whiteness they gain a symbiotic transformation (Matias, 2016). Students in the classroom, as well as their families will reap the rewards of this anti-racist teaching and understanding from their White educators, which will hopefully be the ripple in the water of lasting change.

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnographies are a type of qualitative research which allows the researcher to delve into cultural phenomena and explore and report findings in detail (Hays & Singh, 2012). "Qualitative researchers approach the setting with an intention to become immersed, and to rid themselves of an expert status" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). They

are accepting of and empathetic towards “individuals’ accounts of phenomenon, engaging actively, and integrating new perspectives into their own way of understanding participants, the context, phenomenon, or all three” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). Merriam (2009) states,

The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus in on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive (p. 14).

Through the use of narratives, the author can analyze individual experiences through a detailed lens, hence recognizing relationship similarities and differences with others.

The positionality of self to others is socially constructed and transformable as the self develops its relationship to others-especially strangers and enemies-and reframes its views of others. Understanding the relationship between self and others is one of the tasks that autoethnographers may undertake (Chang, 2008, p. 29).

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). “A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both the process and product” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). As scholars began to recognize missing components of social science inquiry they began to realize the “new relationships between authors, audiences and texts” (Radway,

1984, p. 43). “They realized that stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals, and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others” (Adams, 2008, p. 182).

“Autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). For example, “the researcher can decide who, what, when, where, and how to research, which are usually dictated by institutional requirements such as the Institutional Review Boards” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). This makes this methodology “one that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence” in the research, rather than practiced avoidance of these essential pieces (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 275).

Autoethnography is a way of writing that “privileges the exploration of self in response to questions that can only be answered that way, through textual construction of, and thoughtful reflection about lived experiences” (Goodall, 1998, convention notes). Intimate and personal experiences lie at the heart of autoethnography which “delve into the personal life of the researcher” (Ferdinand, 2009, p. 5). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) explain:

Autoethnography is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation, and then letting it go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives (p. 208).

This written work is much more than collective tales, “for they should spark an emotional chord with readers, causing them to think and feel” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 281). Readers should not only comprehend the text in depth, but should “profoundly experience it, allowing their minds to peruse and stir their innermost thoughts and revelations. The reader should leave the text with an intimate understanding of the author’s experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 281) and how it “may relate to their own lives” (Ferdinand, 2009, p. 5).

As Chang (2008) explains,

Reading and writing autoethnography presents a way of benefits. The self-reflection can lead to self-transformation through self-understanding. The cultural understanding of self and others has the potential of cross-cultural coalition building. Methodologically speaking, the direct access to autobiographical data provides researchers with the possibility of reaching the height of holistic and in-depth cultural self-analysis quickly (p. 18).

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This work was a qualitative research study, using the specific methodology of autoethnography. “The guiding purposes of qualitative research in generating knowledge, then, are description, attention to process, and collaboration within a social structure and with its people” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand the cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). In writing, “the author also may interview others as well as consult with texts like photographs, journals, and recordings to help with recall” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). “Most often, autobiographers write about epiphanies- remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life” (Bochner & Ellis, 1992, p. 166).

Chapter four is consisted of my personal ethnographic narratives, along with critical reflections around those stories. “Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 51). “One purpose of narrative is to redirect the dominant gaze, to make it see from a new point of view what has been there all along” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 4). By utilizing these stories upon deep reflection, they can be an avenue of change for how we engage children of color in the education system. The content analyzed in my study are reflexive journals written throughout my data collection journey, thick descriptions and personal artifacts. “Thick description refers to providing a comprehensive and focused picture of a behavior or occurrence that includes relevant

psychosocial, affective, and cultural undertones” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 8). Since this study was an autoethnography, I utilized the data as it pertained to my personal understanding and reflection on how educational racism is perpetuated by White teachers, whether knowingly or unknowingly. The data and narrative recollections aided in analyzing my personal teaching experiences and behaviors through the lens of Critical Whiteness Studies and allowed me, as a White woman, to interrogate my personal behaviors and identify possible microaggressions perpetuated by White teachers against Black students. Journaling and ethnographic storytelling were also included in my data analysis.

In this study, I strived to describe the witnessed phenomenon of inequity in education for Black students because of White teacher bias and how that information can be used to change the trajectory of negative educational experiences. There is research about inequity in schools; Black students are suspended at a much higher rate than their White counterparts for the same infractions, which results in lower test scores and overall inequity in curriculum accessibility (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, the research is limited on how White teachers perpetuate racism and what can be done to mitigate the damage and change the Black student experience within public education.

Through the use of narratives, two research questions determined the stories shared as I grappled to make sense of when and why I started the journey to become an anti-racist teacher, while I analyzed my personal thoughts and biases that plagued me as I first began my journey in public education. Particular pivotal moments and transformational experiences began to challenge my personal view around my White privilege and how it was directly affecting the students of color that I taught. As I

continued to reflect and make plans for continued change in my teaching practice, I was motivated to share my experiences and transformations with other White teachers on how to engage in more liberatory teaching practices.

Autoethnographies are a type of qualitative research which allows the researcher to delve into cultural phenomena to explore and report in-depth findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). “Qualitative researchers approach the setting with an intention to become immersed and to rid themselves of an expert status” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). “They are accepting and empathetic towards individuals’ accounts of phenomenon, engaging actively, and integrating new perspectives into their own way of understanding participants, the context, phenomenon, or all three” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 4). Merriam (2009) states,

The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive (p. 14).

Analytical reflection of my personal biases and growth, coupled with previous critical conversations I have had over the years with Black teachers began to create fundamental understanding on how I, as a White teacher, can combat inequity in discipline infractions against Black students, advocate for equitable curriculum instruction that is culturally relevant, and diminish racial biases in myself and other White teachers. “Personal values and preferences do not rise from a sociocultural vacuum, the analysis of personal values



and preferences opened the possibility of understanding social ethos” (Chang, 2008, p. 96). In the attempt to understand my actions as a White teacher in relation to my Black students and colleagues, the positionality of my actions, and how it affects other individuals, is extremely important. Through autoethnography I captured my thoughts and revelations as I began to make sense of lived experiences, which caused personal transformation and identification of my racial biases. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). Reframing views of others is a powerful tool in becoming collaborators and creating new knowledge that encourages personal and professional growth.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to share my innermost thoughts about student inequity in the elementary setting and the path I have taken to arrive at those conclusions through written narratives. I am hoping, as a result of my honesty and vulnerability, more White educators will begin the process of self-realization and the powerful part they might play in the liberation and advancement of students of color in the elementary classroom. As I was and continue to be an active participant in the educational culture I am studying, I used autoethnography as the process and personal reflection for my study. Through memory recall of personal experiences, reflexive journaling, artifacts, and thick descriptions, I worked to make sense of my inner thoughts and emotions surrounding those shared situations and how racism perpetuated the reactions of those involved. Throughout this process I learned to not only identify racism biases in my teaching and

disciplinary actions of Black students, but also how to address those biases to better serve and understand my students.

This autoethnography was written in a narrative format as I used Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) to help guide my understanding of the struggles both African American students and teachers face in public education in regard to White teacher racism. The narrative stories found in Chapter Four are a collection of memories from my personal experiences and how years of critical conversations with Black educators have caused me to see those experiences through a different lens, thus potentially shedding light on racism that occurs toward Black students in the form of microaggressions, inequitable discipline, and curriculum that continues to cater to Whiteness.

My research focus for this study was: Documenting the Ongoing Journey of Becoming an Anti-Racist White Educator. I journaled about my experiences and conducted an analysis on my journal entries, noting points of inflection or potential change in my awareness. Two research questions served as the focus for my chosen narratives to appropriately document my journey and aid in my understanding of microaggressions and how that directly affects our students of color. Choosing personal narratives that are categorized by these two questions kept my intimately personal stories organized and allowed me to ruminate on my overall research focus. My two research questions were as follows:

1. Where were the points of inflection in my ongoing journey toward becoming an anti-racist educator?
2. How will I continue the trajectory toward developing an anti-racist mindset?

It was essential to ponder these questions in order to identify what needs to transform so that I can effectuate an anti-racist educational experience for students of color. White teachers must be able to identify the daily mistakes they make in order to correct them. By sharing my learning with other White teachers, I can be the small pebble in the pond that will ripple outward and touch other White teachers, instigating conversations which promote inward reflections so they may too begin the process of becoming an anti-racist teacher. Paulo Freire spoke of the importance of self-education in that you can't liberate someone else, but you can walk alongside them and support them in their journey (Freire, 1970). By being an active advocate for anti-racism, we speak up against the oppression of people of color in an effort to transition from an individual who continues to oppress others with our inactions and silence.

### **Participant/Researcher's Role**

I was the primary participant in this study. Reflection upon my personal experiences and the identification of ways I have precipitated racism in public education allowed me to continue my learning path towards becoming an anti-racist educator. It is my hope that through open and honest reflections, I identified my part in unintended, yet harmful microaggressions (Pierce, 1970), which are defined as "black-white racial interactions characterized by white put-downs, done in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion, that make school an unsafe place for many students of color" (p. 515). I shared my personal stories where I witnessed racial inequality against minority students and what I did to combat that racism, along with ways I could have done to better protect and advocate for those students

It is important to explain my historical background as the researcher, so there is some clarity around how I came to this place. By using the platform of autoethnography I took the role of participant and researcher in tandem. The process of autoethnography is explained by Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011), as...

When researchers do auto-ethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, auto-ethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences (p. 275)

Through this manner, I used my White privilege as a platform to interrogate my lack of understanding. This was a personal starting point for my accountability process in how I may perpetuate racism in the elementary classroom, and how I can incorporate more liberatory practices into my teaching. Until one can truly see their flaws, lasting change cannot be made.

### **Setting/Site**

I teach in a suburban school district in the Midwest portion of the United States. The student population is extremely diverse, and our building was recognized as having one of the most diverse student bodies in the state. There is a high number of Black and Hispanic students, along with a wide variety of countries around the world represented. The faculty and staff are predominantly White, with only two Black female teachers out of approximately 45 staff members. There is one Black male paraprofessional who also

heads the restorative practice implementation, in which few teachers participate. The district has undergone a dramatic demographic change in student population over the past 15 years as more families have pushed further west, thus changing a primarily White district to one of high diversity in some buildings, and primarily Black population in others. As the majority of White families have moved to the western suburbs, property values in the northern municipalities began to decline, while crime increased. Large shopping areas became vacant, and the housing crash of 2008 caused many families to lose their homes. A homeless shelter, long term motels, and HUD housing are the primary housing for half of the district's student population. With the shift in student demographics, the student body of my current building went from almost 100% White students from 2010 to 2020 to an extremely diverse population of 33% White, 31% Black, 19% Hispanic, 17% Multi-Racial or Other Ethnicity students. With this shift came multiple challenges for many of the veteran teachers who were asked to re-examine teaching practices, meet social/emotional needs and introduce novel instructional strategies during these unprecedented times. Test scores continued to be a high priority, as the district strived to protect its accreditation and positive reputation with the state. Years prior the district made the choice to close the smallest elementary building that housed a student population that was 98% Black and continuously experienced failing test scores. Budget cuts were cited as the driving force behind the choice to distribute the low achieving students among the district's more successful schools. That building has since reopened as a completely rehabbed Early Childhood Center for the district. Neighborhood students continue to experience longer commute times to other district buildings. As the displaced students were distributed to other schools, those elementary

buildings reported a steep increase in student behavior problems and office write ups and suspensions became frequent in the buildings who absorbed these misplaced Black students. Detailed recollection of lived experiences and previous conversations with other educators helped deepen my understanding as a White teacher on how to be an anti-racist teacher, along with strategies to communicate the necessary changes needed in public education to my White colleagues, so that anti-racist teaching can be standard in our public education system.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Being the researcher and the participant posed a unique set of possible complications. I worked to be open and honest about how I interpret my own experiences, including interactions with Black educators, who gently informed me of microaggressions I was engaging over the years of my teaching career. I became prepared to share raw examples of how I have been disrespectful or participated in racial microaggressions that hurt Black teachers and students of color. By analyzing these experiences through the lens of White privilege I hope I offered an unspoken vantage of how we as White educators harm our Black colleagues and students. Through personal reflection I came to some personal conclusions on how I as a White teacher can begin to openly speak about my mistakes and move forward to bring awareness to the harm we do to our students and colleagues of color.

I am a middle-class White female, who has grown up with privilege my entire life. I had very limited experiences with Black students and no experience with Black colleagues until I was hired in my current district. It is embarrassing to admit I had

preconceived notions of Black students' behavior as well as parental support and behavior. I made many mistakes as I maneuvered through changes that came about by being placed in a classroom comprised entirely of low-income Black students. I am fortunate my Black colleagues showed me extreme patience and grace. The times I misspoke and was racist pains me still to this day. This is one of the driving reasons for my passion to create change so that all students and staff members can be spared from inconsiderate mistakes that cause emotional hurt.

### **Ethical Issues**

This study was a narrative auto-ethnography which refers to texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others. Here the emphasis was on the ethnographic study of myself as the researcher, which is accomplished by attending to encounters between the narrator and members of the groups being studied (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The stories, memories and reflections that are in this study occurred and are true. The individuals involved are protected through pseudonyms, pronouns and descriptions. The identifying names of districts, schools, and other district facilities have all been changed. I chose the method of narrative autoethnography so the study is focused not only on my witnessing and interpretation of events, but my analysis of my thoughts and actions in those specific narratives, and how that led to my actions and beliefs as a White woman in education. My personal reflections can directly aid in the understanding of how White teachers in public education can do better by students and teachers of color.

Bochner, (1997) explains,

Thus, the auto-ethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people (p. 427).

Unfortunately, one of the risks of an autoethnography is implicating those involved in the study through stories that others may recognize. All attempts were made to mitigate this concern. “Auto ethnographers must stay aware of how these protective devices can influence the integrity of their research as well as how their work is interpreted and understood” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 282). I was diligent in protecting the identity of those involved in the study while maintaining the validity and integrity of my work. I understand that this is a possible upsetting topic that could evoke strong emotions in the readers. I believe in my reflective process and strove to utilize the events and stories to bring positive and lasting change for minority staff and student treatment experienced in public education by White teachers (Hays & Singh, 2012; Ferdinand, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I proceed on this journey of personal enlightenment, I will continue to call out injustices as I witness them and use my White privilege to reach and teach others my lessons learned.



## **CHAPTER 4: The Pathway to Anti-Racism**

### **Locker and Hallway Changes**

I grew up in extremely White spaces where there was no diversity. Everyone looked and acted like my family. In fact, one might liken my childhood to Mayberry where I was raised in a century home in a neighborhood where tall oaks and pines lined the streets and shaded the large front porches where we drank cold lemonade in the summer. From sunrise to sundown, I played outside with my friends and we entertained ourselves with outdoor games, crafts, bike rides, and creative play. We ate lunch at whoever's house we happened to be at when our stomachs growled. It was safe, and I had everything I needed. The only questionable individual we ever encountered was a White woman named Roberta who would paint her face stark white and dance about on the busy street corner three blocks from my house. We would occasionally encounter her on our jaunts to 7-Eleven to buy candy and gum, but we always made sure we had tennis shoes on to outrun her if she decided to chase us home, which occasionally happened. She was the mayor's adult daughter who had gotten mixed up with drugs and had catastrophic results, which included hallucinations, leading her to believe one of my best friends was her sister. For this reason, she pursued us home, but never caught us nor harmed us. Life in my neighborhood was very White.

On nice days I walked to school, but not the neighborhood school. I attended a private Lutheran school. The busy street just blocks from my home served as a race divider in my town, which is where the Black families lived. Because of district boundaries, I would have attended an extremely diverse school which was closer to downtown and frequently rumored to have the most discipline issues and lowest test

scores. My parents chose to send me to private school for Kindergarten through eighth grade, where the class sizes were small and the staff and students were White. I learned nothing about African American history, but I was proficient in the Bible. As I neared the end of my education at private school my parents had choices to make concerning which school I would next attend. Catholic schools were in abundance in our area. However, with no Lutheran high schools the other option was public school. Our house would have me headed downtown into a high crime location which was not an option in my parent's opinion. They chose to build a house in the affluent newer part of town that boasted high performing schools with very few minorities. The minority students were from middle to upper middle-class families and acted no different than the other families and students I had been around my entire life. I struggle to remember learning any history about other cultures, especially African American history. In similar fashion to my own children, all of my AP, advanced placement courses, were attended by all White students and I cannot recall a single Black or Hispanic student I ever had class with. I never had a single minority teacher.

At the end of my junior year there was rumored talk of a desegregation program being implemented, which would affect our student population the following year by busing a few hundred Black students into the other two high schools that we located in the wealthier parts of town. Being a typical self-absorbed teenager, I did not give any consideration to how this would potentially affect the building climate I was familiar with until the first day of school my senior year.

Senior year in high school is the culmination of all educational experiences which bring you to the upper echelon of all students. This comes with a number of unwritten

rules and advantages that go beyond the ability to choose classes first and have a locker in the prime spot of the building, keeping one from dashing to random parts of the building to switch out books between classes. That morning I walked into the building with the other cheerleaders feeling quite high on life. My high school years were charmed with my upper middle-class White privilege, which not only allowed me to have my own car but feel comfortable enough to be wildly outgoing without shame. Through my popularity I served on multiple committees, was repeatedly elected class president, ran track, was a cheerleader, was voted homecoming and prom court and participated in Honor Society thanks to my high GPA. People knew who I was and while I was friendly with all student groups, that morning my friendliness toward everyone evaporated as I walked up to my assigned locker. As I entered the locker combination, a young Black freshman loudly came up behind me and hollered that I was in his locker. I haughtily corrected him that I was a senior and this was my locker and really who in the hell did he think he was. His overall demeanor irritated me as he explained it was his first day at our high school after a long bus ride. I gave no thought to his circumstances and angrily marched to the office demanding the issue be fixed and this intruder be reassigned to a different place. I was informed with the new students arriving from the city many of us would have to double up our lockers. This was unacceptable and honestly incomprehensible that I would have to share a locker, being that I held the status I did. Wanting to be an attorney, I was unwilling to accept that reality and continued to lobby my case to the principal who agreed to reassign the new freshman to share with someone else. It never occurred to me how those actions must have affected that individual that morning. My Becky behavior (Matias, 2020) was in full view, and in reflection I now

understand why our Black principal never stood up to me that day. I essentially did what Leonardo (2009) calls, “throwing the White race card, an action used to invoke race in a manner that maintains their innocence” (p. 116). “Opportunistically using white racial identity to feign innocence and victimization becomes a progress that maintains white supremacy” (Matias, 2016, p. 36). The rules of Whiteness were in full force that day and I’m confident that rather than deal with the irate White parents it was much easier to make the new Black students double up lockers, rather than force current White students to share their perceived property.

That year drastically altered my personal views on the Black race. I had little to no educational experience with Black individuals. Up until my senior year the Black friends and students that attended high school with me acted White. Even though they were not in my AP classes they strictly followed the societal norms created by the predominantly White population in our neighborhoods and school. However, when the Black students from the city arrived, they challenged our White norms. The hallways became extremely loud with blaring rap music and overpowering conversations between classes. Dancing and intelligible screaming where individuals would be jostled around the hallways was increasingly common and caused tension between the White and new Black students. I became highly irritated with the disorganization and chaos, as I was frequently bumped into and then told to watch out, when I had not caused the incident. Longing for the school environment before the transfer students arrived was ever present. I was daily relieved to slip into my advanced placement classrooms that were primarily White students. “The racially stratified academic hierarchy seems to confirm widespread stereotypes and intelligence and makes seeing a smart Black person weird” (Lewis &

Diamond, 2015, pp. 99-100). Many White parents began to complain about the change in the building environment, and more fights began to break out. It seemed as though the office was constantly overflowing with Black students who had been kicked out of class and suspensions were commonplace. “Discipline was racialized not only in terms of the often-discussed pattern of treating Black and Brown youth as inherently suspect but also in terms of a pattern of treating white students as inherently innocent” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, pp. 48-49). My senior year was still memorable and fun, but my opinion of having a diverse building shifted from one of curiosity and openness to that of a negative connotation. Looking back on that experience I see a number of misconceptions developed that year, but one situation that really sticks out in my mind surrounds the bid for academic scholarships.

### **Are Awarded Scholarships an Example of Reverse Racism**

My mom was a CPA and worked in corporate settings, while dad worked in construction as an insulator. They have always instilled a strong work ethic into my siblings and I, and it has been obvious their hard work and commitment to get ahead allowed us to have a beautiful home with nice vehicles to drive. When I turned 16, I was awarded permission to drive the older third vehicle. My jeep was not terrifically quick or fancy, but it got me around and was high school cool. My father put my mom through college early in their marriage, and I vaguely remember playing Barbies under the dining room table while she did her studies and prepared for the CPA exam. It is my understanding this independent college accomplishment was one of the reasons my parents announced to me I would be solely responsible for college if I decided to not

attend a community college first. Being both the oldest and female I experienced an extremely strict home life, where curfew was hours earlier than my peers and my goal of going away to school was not one from which I would be deterred. My avenue to The University of Iowa was going to come from scholarships. The summer before my senior year I began applying for any and all scholarships for which I qualified. These included academic, service, church, organizational and general scholarships. Most of my peers had families who were paying for their college education and were not applying for the same scholarships as I. There was one individual I continuously went up against for these awards. He was a Black student at my high school and extremely talented in singing and dancing. His grade point was lower than mine and he was never in any of the AP classes that dominated my schedule. Looking back, this is not surprising since “White students are heavily overrepresented in honors and AP courses, while Black and Latina/o students are overrepresented in low-track courses” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 97). Not only were we required to fill out pages of information and questions, but there were usually interviews if you were selected to be a top candidate. I was confident I would rightly dominate these awards, as my credentials were more favorable on paper. However, the many scholarship committees did not agree and he continued to be awarded every high dollar scholarship we applied for. I remember feeling so angry and slighted that he quickly had an excess of \$40,000 above and beyond what his 4 years of college would cost. Harris (1993) suggests “whiteness is best understood as a form of property rights” (p. 1731). I thought these scholarships belonged to me, they were rightfully mine based on the academic evidence I was privy to. However, to fully comprehend my academic success when compared to that young man, one would need “to consider the ways in

which congruence with the culture of power contributes to academic achievement” (Delpit, 2006, p. 17).

At the end of those frantic months of scholarship application I had a total of \$4,500 in awards, while he had \$60,000. For years I raged about that circumstance, as I took out loan after loan, while waiting tables to make ends meet during my four years at Iowa. When I heard he flunked out of school our sophomore year, I was convinced I was the rightful applicant and the only reason they repeatedly chose him was based on the color of his skin. I lost track of the amount of times I told myself I was the victim of reverse racism. That mindset does not stand in solidarity. “Whites believe racism against Whites is more prevalent than racism against Blacks” (Matias, 2006, p. 14). In fact, when my oldest son had the same experience I found myself reverting back to those thoughts and even argued with a Black professor over the perceived unfairness. I remember vividly how he called me racist as I argued my point that it was unfair that one should be awarded scholarships based on the color of their skin, when a White student is more deserving per the guidelines. Instead of crying, which is a common White response (Matias, 2020), I became intensely angry at this Black man for calling me racist when I taught mainly Black students. “White comfort zones are notorious for tolerating only small doses of racial confrontation” (Hunter & Nettles, 1999, p. 6). It has not been until recently that I am deeply embarrassed by that encounter, as in hindsight I was indeed being racist. When analyzing this professor’s response to me it “does not suggest that educators procure a hostile environment, but a pedagogical situation that fails to address white racism in arguably already the conduit of hostility” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 34). This knowledge I have acquired through difficult conversations, coursework and research has

led me to recognize my White privilege reaction, leaving me quite horrified at not only my actions, but my inner thoughts as well. This is how Whiteness manifests itself and had I not embarked on this doctoral journey, I doubt I would have concluded my initial thoughts and beliefs were misled on the most fundamental levels. Through these specific points of inflection, I can begin to realize where gradual shifts in my thinking and behavior occurred for the better.

### **Reinforcing the Status Quo in the College Years**

As I progressed through my years at The University of Iowa, much of my educational experiences reverted to how I was raised. The awareness that students of various cultural backgrounds attended this big ten school was there, however I rarely, if ever crossed paths with anyone other than White students. I joined the Greek system and became a member of Alpha Delta Pi, which boasted a diverse group of women. However, there was not one Black individual in our sorority. I rationalized it as their preference to join one of the Black sororities on campus, and no questioned how that was not racist. As I recall, I cannot remember a single Black student being in the Greek system at all, or even participating in rush. Through my enormous classes of hundreds of students to the more intimate classes for my education major, I rarely if ever had class with any Black students. The few individuals I did meet were student athletes, which reinforced my beliefs that the majority of Black students were there on athletic scholarships. “In this regard, coaches, as well as teachers and principals, tend to view Black students, compared to their White counterparts, as hungry and more likely to be coachable, which will make them good basketball players” (James, 2016, p. 66). The way the university ran



their athlete programs kept the athletes on the other side of the river in specific dorms, meaning they rarely interacted with most of the student body. Never in my four years at Iowa did I have a Black partner in class or a Black professor. “The inequity in the school system is evident in the failure of schools to respond to the needs, interests and aspirations of minority students, this leading to their marginalization and alienation” (James, 2016, p. 72). Looking back at my undergraduate experience from 1995-1999 it appears that not much has changed in regards to Black professors in higher education. From 2014-2019, I earned two Master’s degrees and it was only after I entered a doctoral program I ever had a Black professor teach me. Throughout my entire educational career from Kindergarten through doctorate I have only had three Black teachers, and all of them were in my doctorate studies. That is a travesty, as I never experienced any counternarratives to my Whiteness through all of my childhood and well into my adult life. This spoke volumes to me, and I cannot imagine the message that has been sent to the hundreds of thousands of Black students who have navigated through the educational system and not seen themselves in their teacher.

### **Hiding in the Toybox**

The Midwest became my home because my husband took a job offer here, and I worked with my university to student teach in a Midwest School District. After successfully finishing my student teaching I eagerly accepted the first teaching position offered to me in a Midwest rural district. The entire teaching staff and student population was White and the majority of my students received free lunch because of the high poverty rate in the area. Considering it was my first year as a teacher, discipline was a

challenge and with a classroom full of 26 children and little to no supplies I struggled with parent involvement, student attendance and rampant lice. After purchasing a home over an hour away in October that year, I made the decision to not return and accepted a contract to teach Kindergarten in a wealthy Midwest District. Unlike my first year of teaching, where the population was all White, this building had a high international population of students, because of the proximity of well-known hospitals and corporations. Though the student population was diverse there was a very small number of Black children, and those in our building were predominantly bused in through the desegregation program. “Many students who had to rely on busing to attend school were denied the possibility of enriched learning that resulted in extracurricular activities” (Davis, 2019, p. 10). I was specifically told by the building principal, those kids from the city were the behavior issues and the parents were uninvolved and disinterested in their children’s education. It was also communicated to me that some Black students were county brownies and were identifiable by their dress and acceptable behavior. These parents, I was told, were involved and great care needed to be taken to not mix up the two types of Black families. As a new teacher with only one-year experience I listened carefully and looked forward to meeting my class with a small amount of trepidation surrounding the students participating in the desegregation program. I had one child from the desegregation program that year and with preconceived notions I am confident I was hypersensitive to any behavior that occurred. My student’s name was Lanny and she was incredibly petite with a short attention span, which caused her to get up and randomly begin playing in the centers section. Her favorite was the home section where she could play house with the kitchenette. Lanny frequently fell asleep in class and would often

find spots in the classroom to curl up and sleep. I had no idea what her home life was like, and looking back I am so disappointed that my younger self did not try to build a relationship with her mother, as I just assumed she would not be interested. When parent teacher conferences arrived and her mother signed up for a time I was pleasantly surprised, yet when she did not show up I chalked it up to her lack of educational interest. It appeared that everything I had been told was correct.

The pivotal point with Lanny was when she disappeared from my class toward the end of the year. As I lined everyone, including Lanny, who needed many reminders to follow directions, we headed to the cafeteria for an assembly. My class was incredibly quiet for half of the assembly, which was rare considering Lanny frequently needed reminders to stay focused and not talk. It was then that I realized Lanny was not with our class. Heaving my seven-month pregnant self off the floor, I asked my teammate to keep an eye on my class and I went in search of her, feeling confident she had excused herself to the bathroom without permission. After checking the bathrooms, hallways, classroom and office I headed back to the cafeteria with a pit in my stomach. When the assembly ended I immediately told my principal I had misplaced Lanny and with a loud sigh she remarked, of course she is. The next 60 minutes were the longest of my life as every available individual dropped what they were doing to search for her. Her mother was called with no answer. The police were notified in case she had left the premises. Meanwhile, my students moved to free choice time in the center area as I desperately fought emotions ranging from fear to anger at this tiny 5-year-old. Suddenly, one of my children yelled Lanny, what are you doing? There she was, dead asleep in the large toy box where we stored the dress up clothes. Waves of relief rushed over me as I called the

office to relay Lanny had been found. Trying to keep from losing my cool I attempted to calmly ask her what had happened. She informed me that she didn't sleep the night before and so she slipped out of the line and hid in the toy box to take a nap. Visions of not finding her and being on the news flashed through my mind. The principal stormed through the room with fire in her eyes as she began to interrogate Lanny about her choice. As the school day was ending and Lanny was handed down the punishment of no recess for a week I felt something shift inside me toward Lanny. "Discipline both implicitly and explicitly meant something different for students of color than for White students" (Lustick, 2017, p.121). Imagine being a child who did not get to sleep the night before and seeing the classroom toybox as the best option for rest. After the buses departed, I was summoned to the principal's office for a stern conversation of what could have happened and my responsibility pertaining to the situation. I was informed that the mother had been reached and told of her child's punishment. There were many opinions about the lack of interest and care from the mother and the correlation of that to Lanny's behavior.

I couldn't shake the horrible feeling over the next few hours that I had potentially misjudged this mother. Up until that point in my life my educational experiences were those involving primarily White individuals. I had effectively brought into the belief that Black families did not value education like White families and when it came to behavior in school, Black children were more likely to disobey, not listen, and underperform their White counterparts. I was under the belief that if Black families just invested in their child's education the gap would close and that the fault was not that of the teacher or the district. Instead, it would have been prudent "to focus on the racial achievement gap,

overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education and suspension, and the harsh punitive measures, which detract from an analysis of the role white teachers and administrators play in this manifestation (Matias, 2020, p. 160). I called Lanny's mother that evening to apologize for losing sight of her daughter and also to alleviate the intense guilt I felt weighing heavily on my heart that perhaps I was horribly wrong in all my assumptions. When no one answered I did something I never did; I left my personal phone number for her to call me back that evening. Surprisingly enough she did and it was through that conversation I learned how much Lanny's mom was invested in her education. Not only did she do any and everything to make sure she was a part of the desegregation program to get her out of the city schools, but she had Lanny up before 6:00 a.m. to get her ready for the bus that would pick her up first in the morning to deliver Lanny along with a number of other students into the suburbs in search of a better educational experience. I also found out conferences and after school programs were out of the question as they did not own a car and the city bus did not come that far. Lanny's mom shared a small apartment with other family members and worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. Sometimes Lanny had to sleep on the floor, or the couch, depending which family members were staying with them. Her mother wanted Lanny to have a better experience and life than she had and was willing to do anything to keep her in the desegregation program. The urban district in which they resided "had lower levels of overall resources, lower teachers' salaries, and lower levels of educator qualifications, than other districts, as well as lower student performance" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 112). Instead of speaking with a mother who was uninvested in her daughter's education, I found a mother desperate to do whatever it took to ensure her daughter would receive

the best educational experience, even if that meant hours of bus rides, missing out on conferences, extracurricular activities and community acceptance.

I hung up after that phone call with a drastically different perception of Lanny and her family than I originally had. Not only had my opinion been altered, but I began to question how my principal interacted with our Black families from the city. I began to notice how she put forth little effort into her communication with those families and inflicted harsher punishments on the Black children who made it to her office. The following year I moved to second grade and began to not only question this behavior, but speak out about it when I saw other teachers participate in unfair and discriminatory discipline. One of my second-grade colleagues was notorious for singling out the desegregation students and after months of observing her behavior I mustered up the nerve to say something about it. That did not bode well for me, as this particular individual was extremely close with the principal who encouraged that behavior. As I began to speak up frequently for students, more attention was given to me and my classroom and quite suddenly, in the eyes of my principal, I was no longer a good teacher. I was highly encouraged to think about staying home with my infant son as I would not be getting my one-year contract renewed the following year. I learned there is a price to be paid when you challenge Whiteness.

### **Why Would You Ever Want to Teach There**

Even though my husband and I had discussed the option of my staying home from the time I had my son I was deeply upset the choice was taken away from me. My confidence was shaken and I questioned the integrity of public education and

administrators. It was apparent my contract had not been renewed because I spoke up and criticized the behaviors of those who actively discriminated against children in the desegregation program. By witnessing and challenging the racism and inequitable discipline to specific students I was labeled no longer a team player. I loved teaching, but was horrified at the politics and ulterior motives. The decision to stay home and raise two sons lasted six years, which brought us to my youngest entering Kindergarten. During those six years I privately tutored children and served as a weekly classroom volunteer in my children's classrooms. I was able to continue my passion of teaching safe from the politics of public education.

As the economy tanked and my husband's business began to fail I made a monumental decision to return to the classroom. In a flurry of applications, I was offered a number of positions in highly regarded districts to only have the offers rescinded. One principal who had known my old superior asked to meet me on a Sunday and informed me my old principal, hearing I was applying for positions, had gone out of their way to slander my character. This led me to search for a teaching position into August, further from home, with little hope of securing a spot. Again, I was painfully reminded of what happened to those who speak up against racism. Even six years later I was paying the price for questioning the integrity and motives of White educators.

The weekend before school was to begin I was offered a Kindergarten teaching position in a Midwest rural district that was predominantly White with once again no minority staff or students. This played to my strengths and I enjoyed two years there until deciding to look for a position closer to home that offered a higher salary. Fate had it that I was offered the first position I applied for in a highly diverse school district. Excited

about the opportunity to not only make more money, but challenge myself I eagerly entered into the district's new teacher training. Surprisingly enough the reactions of current district employees were not always positive when I shared the building where I would be teaching. Through that week I learned there were six new teachers hired for our building and that mass exodus was a commonality for that building known as the armpit of the district. It was common belief, while the building was situated in a successful district "the students were unable to benefit because they live in a *culture of poverty*, experience poor parenting, or are implicitly thought it is not usually said straightforwardly, innately inferior." (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 120). I was elated to have gotten a teaching position and immediately loved my newly hired colleagues. As we set our rooms up and decorated bulletin boards the other teaching staff ignored us and even shot unwelcoming looks our way. This was disarming for me since the teachers who seemed most caustic about my arrival were Black female teachers. Up until this point in my life and teaching career I had little to no interaction with Black colleagues and limited interaction with Black students. I made the decision to insert myself into conversations and went out of my way to meet my new colleagues. Unbeknownst to me the small staff that was left had been through massive trauma with the prior principal who reigned by terrorizing the staff and had been fired mid-year, where central office had to take over. These teachers, especially the Black teachers who had borne the brunt of the trauma, trusted no one, including new White teachers. My natural instinct was to automatically assume they were just typical angry Black women, or "Sapphires which are known as a Black woman with an attitude and mean for no apparent reason" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 88), who I had mostly tried to avoid throughout my life. Understanding I would have to



work with these women, I continued to instigate conversations and invite myself into their space. I did not recognize the error of my ways, which basically demanded they notice my overt overtures of forced friendship.

The Black school counselor was the first to engage with me and throughout a series of conversations we found a multitude of commonalities. I learned trust toward any outsiders was almost nonexistent, which included the new principal who had hired me. As we began the school year I quickly noticed I was unprepared for the culture shock I was facing. My classroom was comprised of all Black students, except for one White male. The noise level in my classroom was higher than I had experienced and movement was constant with my students frequently yelling across the room and spontaneously breaking out into song and dance. The data revealed our building was about 89% free and reduced lunch and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade MAP testing scores from the year before showed 7% proficiency in Math and 0% in Reading. I realized I needed support and I asked my Black colleagues for help in understanding how to best teach my students who came from backgrounds and cultures I was completely unfamiliar with. I believe by setting aside preconceived notions and biases I held, I was able to start the growth process of not only becoming a better teacher for my students but also embarking on friendships that crossed color lines. Over the next few months, with the careful planning of authentic team building by my principal, the previous staff began to trust not only the administrative staff, but also the new White teachers that accompanied her. This was not a flawless process, and I personally made a number of grave missteps which caused one Black teacher in particular to dislike me with fervor.

I became more comfortable with my surroundings. I began to get to know my colleagues on a more personal level through shared stories and overall time spent together. I had established a friendship with our Black counselor and automatically thought that friendship gave me *carte blanche* to joke and kid with one other Black staff member that I did not particularly know that well. It was a Monday morning and in a rushed hurry to make my copies and get set up for the day I entered the tiny rectangular room that housed the copier. Our counselor was in deep conversation with the one other Black colleague I did not know well. I entered and greeted them with a common acknowledgement I had overheard them use with each other: Hey bitches can I use the copier? Immediately hearing a quick intake of air like a gasp I turned my head to see my other colleague taking off her earrings. Being a native White woman with little to no experience around Black females I was clueless to her anger. With her hand on the other woman's arm the counselor quickly shooed me out of the miniscule room offering to bring me my copies. Unbeknownst to me the two of them were engaged in a deeply personal conversation that I had rudely interrupted with an overly familiar liberty to address them as bitches. Thankfully the counselor took pity on my White ignorance and explained to me what had happened and how close I had been to getting hit by my other colleague. I have since learned when a Black female takes off her earring in a confrontation you had better be ready because she is serious about taking you out. Through these drastic mistakes I made that first year I began to learn how oblivious I was to truly understanding individuals of other races. I began to comprehend the overt lack of trust was "because the hardening of the souls and hearts protect from the trauma incurred by the endless barrage of racial and gender microaggressions" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 74).

Fortunately for me I was surrounded by amazingly strong and communicative Black colleagues who were understanding of my ignorance. This not only educated me on how to interact with my Black students and families in a respectful and non-threatening manner, but it was also the foundation for some of the strongest friendships I have had the good fortune of forming. It is imperative for “all white women to own that we are all inescapably *Becky*’s and that by owning that, we can do a better job of recognizing it and fixing the issues we cause” (Matias, 2020, p. 162).

Thankfully that teacher was patient and forgiving of this naive White girl and is now a close friend. She continues to help me navigate unknown situations and quickly sets me straight when I make White mistakes. It is imperative to state that I have learned to understand this was not my Black colleagues’ responsibility to educate me on my mishaps. This is a common mistake many White people make. As they navigate situations and have questions, it is not appropriate to demand a lesson from a Black friend or colleague to help alleviate White curiosity or confusion. I too have thought it prudent to ask a Black individual if I have a racial question. As I continue to comprehend my Whiteness, I recognize with gratitude, the overtures made by Black colleagues and friends when they did not owe me the explanation.

Our small building thrived in the three years I worked there before our district made the decision to close our building and disperse our primarily Black student population amongst the other elementary buildings. We were told it was the best solution for budgeting issues, but it became widely known throughout the district that even with steady student progress our building was dangerously close to the states’ lowest performing 10% schools, which would allow the state to come in and run that building

(Gordon, 2019). Instead of risking the embarrassment of state involvement, the district landed a blow to an already vulnerable population and took away one of the most predictable elements of their lives: their home school. Our mixed staff became a close-knit family and earned the trust of the families and children, increasing involvement by 100%. I still long for those days, as I have never again had a teaching experience as unique and special as those three years. As a White teacher I began to recognize how much race plays into teaching in the classroom. Some of the biggest lessons I learned as a teacher came from that time are as follows.

First, Black families care deeply about education and will work tirelessly to make sure their children are successful and engaged (Love, 2020). Barriers preventing Black families from being more involved with school include feeling unwelcome by White staff members, prior negative experiences, feelings of inferiority in terms of educational experience, and judgmental comments (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Often, Black families share homes with multiple family members and this can make logistics at home difficult. Family is incredibly important and what happens in the family stays in the family at all costs (Evans-Winters, 2019). Hair is incredibly important to Black females and if they are not able to get their hair finished in one evening they would rather get in trouble for wearing a hood than showing their hair that is not fixed (Evans-Winters, 2019). Learning these cultural values aided in my understanding on how to best serve my students. Over time I developed strong and personal relationships with my families who showed deep loyalty when I went through a painful divorce. When I was asked to participate in a three-year long loop for 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade I was incredibly excited for the prospect of having the same children and families for three years. Today I remain very close to many of those

families, whose children graduated high school this year. That three-year experience taught me to question the beliefs I had harbored my whole life. I began to question how my Whiteness directly affected my teaching and my students. It is incredibly important to take “the opportunity to unpack that we are, as White women, privileged by the current racial hierarchy” (Matias, 2020, p. 162). Through difficult and telling conversations with Black colleagues I began to make fundamental shifts in my teaching and in my approaches to classroom discipline. For example, instead of immediately reacting to students loudly talking (Matias, 2016), I began to listen to what they were saying. Oftentimes the loudness was educational. I started the slow process of questioning and interrogating my prior beliefs that Black families were not as serious about education. I began to recognize the uphill battle they faced daily with White teachers forcing their children into learning styles that did not apply to them. It was not until they closed that building and I was transferred that I began to actively question other White colleagues about their actions. This was not received well at times, however with the protection of tenure I became more emboldened in my advocacy.

### **She’s Always in the Hallway**

The years following those three intensely magical years I had experienced at the underperforming building were a blur of master’s classes and various curriculum adoptions. The building I had been placed in was ranked as one of the most diverse in the state with our building alone requiring four full time ELL (English Language Learner) teachers. This building was not particularly known as low income, but when compared to other parts of the district we were on the lower economic end. As I observed the students

entering my grade level I noticed particular White teachers frequently had Black students set out in the hallway. It also became increasingly obvious even though our Black population was less than half of the school population, Black students made up the majority of office write-ups and suspensions (Lewis & Diamond). As I entered into my doctoral program and began researching educational disparity I realized with a sinking feeling that I was witnessing it on a daily basis. The district's suggestion to combat this glaring disparity and address the education gap between Black students and their White counterparts was through the use of Restorative Practices. As administrators embraced the quick fix for discipline issues to hopefully alleviate the constant barrage of office referrals, this new intervention was pushed with vigor. Unfortunately, I was studying the harmful effects this specific intervention had on students of color when teachers were not properly trained. For example, forcing Black children to admit their wrong doing and confess the reasoning behind those choices can implicitly go against keeping family business private (Lustick, 2015). The lack of trust in their White teachers was creating a fundamental lack of communication with students, which only managed to incite anger and frustration with students and staff (Matias, 2016). Restorative circles were held without the needed safety guidelines in place, which caused students to feel unheard and vulnerable. By voicing my concern and counternarrative to the use of these practices I got unwanted attention from staff members who disagreed with me and the research I was doing. However, the three Black colleagues in the building approached me and verified my thoughts about the harmful effects of this intervention. It was then I actively began to communicate and build trusting relationships with these three individuals to aid in my continued quest to be a better White teacher for my students of color. With great

trepidation they too had noticed the imbalance of Black students in the hallway.

Together, we brainstormed how to change the trajectory of these children's educational experience.

One student in particular stands out in my mind. She lived in the hallway and could frequently be heard screaming to be let in at the top of her lungs while banging on the wooden door that was locked from the inside to keep her out. After a series of these instances I began to pay more attention to the reasoning behind these hallway banishments. When I would pass her on my way back to class I made a point to speak to her. Her quick wit kept me on my toes and her blunt answers could be construed as highly disrespectful if you took her seriously. Her teacher was a second-year White teacher who was notorious for putting the same three Black students in the hallway and locking the door. Not only did this young girl spend the majority of her time in the hallway, but she was also frequently suspended from school. Data show that minority students are suspended almost three times more than their White counterparts for the same discipline infractions (Fabelo, 2011). Did she hit other children or pose a physical threat? No. She would make comments to her teacher with the main objective to not only get her attention, but to also make sure she kept her attention. This child was a constant topic in the teacher's lounge and when the mom or dad would come to school to challenge a punishment they were immediately labeled as crazy and psycho. Her parents had the choice to "observe the safety of whites and be denied a space that promotes people of color's growth and development or insist on a space of integrity and risk being conceived of illogical or irrational" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 140). I could not help but wonder why the White parents who behaved the same way were never labeled as

such. One specific example that stands out was when this child saw a fitness tag on her teacher's key chain and asked if she worked out there. Her teacher replied yes to be met with the response of, good you need to go because you are kind of fat. She was immediately sent to the office for disrespect and suspended for a day. I believe one of the most detrimental punishments for this child was being put in the hallway with a locked door to prevent her from becoming part of the classroom community. Children stated she was a bully and the more time she spent in the hallway, the more she became an ostracized member of the class. The disdain this young White teacher had toward this Black female was palatable when she was in her vicinity. After a specific episode where this child had been escorted to the office by the intervention team I approached the teacher and asked about her reasoning for repeatedly removing the student from her learning environment. I was met with tears and immediate defense tactics that included statements that included I love all my students. I'm not a racist teacher. I have Black friends and love my Black students. Matias (2020) states in her book *Surviving Becky(s)* White women's tears are incredibly dangerous for Black individuals. One needs to look no further than the horrific story of Emmett Till who was murdered after the false accusation from a White woman (Matias, 2020). That White teacher, with her hurt feelings, went to our supervisor where I was then asked to not be aggressive toward staff members and allow her to run her classroom as she saw fit. It was then I requested to have that child in my class the following year. I had not yet recognized that this request of mine may have been me taking on the part of White savior.

My request was granted and she was placed in my classroom. The first meeting with her parents was tension filled and uncomfortable as they sat down to meet with me



for the beginning of the year conferences. I was eager to share with this family I had requested their daughter and was confident she would have an excellent year in my room. As I probed further, the mother began to share that up until the last year their daughter, who had attended school in the city, had Black teachers and never presented any behavioral issues. I also learned the child had a disabled brother at home who was confined to a wheelchair following a catastrophic diving accident. It appeared this young girl was willing to be content with any attention, whether it be positive or negative. One of the most heartbreaking conversations we had was after Melissa had called another child an insulting name on the second day of school. As I approached her to discuss the situation she immediately told me she would just go in the hallway now, questioning if I would be locking the door behind me? She had been conditioned to believe every time she broke the rules or made someone upset she would be sequestered into the hallway as punishment. It took some time for her to learn that no one left our room as a punishment and that she had to process how her actions affected other people. When she would blatantly state she hated my eclectic outfit or makeup choice I would calmly remind her everyone was entitled to their own opinion and I dressed for myself and no one else. That year I built a strong and valuable relationship with not only my student, but her parents as well. Whiteness in education directly correlates to the oppression of people of color, where many Black and Brown students drop out of school because the lack of understanding and authentic care from teachers in a White educational system (Matias, 2016). I found by breaking down walls and forcing myself to look at my own biases and beliefs I could better serve my students of color and their families.

The process of becoming an anti-racist teacher was not a one-day process, or even a one-year process. This journey has been one that spans over 20 years of my career with subtle hints that challenged my childhood beliefs and biases. There have also been obvious, in my face situations that caused me to step back in shame for having insulted a colleague or handled a discipline infraction in a harmful manner. I'm ashamed to admit I did not have Black colleagues until I was well immersed in my profession as a classroom teacher. Until I was hired to teach at that small failing elementary I did not have any true Black friends. These Black colleagues and students have taught me more than any college courses or degrees ever could have (DiAngelo, 2018). I am grateful for the patience through the frustrating situations I have placed my Black colleagues and friends in as they helped educate me in all my ignorance. I am a better human because of it.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chapter One of this study introduced how, by using autoethnography, I employed reflexive journaling of my personal experiences, to note points of inflection and potential changes in my awareness, as I interrogate my racial biases. By sharing these reflections on my own narratives, I attempted to see my Whiteness through the theoretical framework of Critical Whiteness Studies. Through analytical reflection I gain an understanding on how my teaching pedagogy impacts students of color and will continue create fundamental understanding on how I, as a White teacher, can combat inequity in discipline infractions against Black students, advocate for equitable curriculum instruction that is culturally relevant, and diminish racial biases in myself and other White teachers in the hopes of promoting anti-racist teaching in public education. Two research questions framed this autoethnographic work.

They are:

1. Where were the points of inflection in my ongoing journey towards becoming an anti-racist educator?
2. How will I continue the trajectory toward developing an anti-racist mindset?

Chapter Two of this study addressed the review of literature on a number of topics pertinent to this work. I acknowledge there is a vast amount of literature on specific topics included in Chapter Two. However, I strived to use studies and literature that would appropriately frame the topic I was looking to investigate, which is my personal reflection of my own racial bias and how my Whiteness directly affects the students of color in my classroom. Chapter Three detailed the methodology I used in this study,

which is autoethnography, and how I utilized transformational moments throughout my life and teaching career to recognize fundamental shifts in my thinking. Chapter Four is a series of personal narratives, which I recognize as points of inflection that caused me to begin to examine my racial bias and racism. These narratives are consecutive and represent fundamental moments where I can undoubtedly recognize a shift in mentality. This is not a complete and exhaustive list of events in which I have identified personal growth in striving to become an anti-racist educator. I understand this is a lifelong journey, yet there must be a beginning to a journey and journaling and analyzing past experiences is, in my opinion, the best way to begin. Chapter Five discusses the major findings and in-depth reflections as it pertains to the shared narratives found in Chapter Four. This chapter will also include limitations as well as recommendations and suggestions for future work using the information found in this study.

While digging into my memory to identify and communicate fundamental points of inflection where there were shifts in my thinking and beliefs, I have a jumbled mix of emotions that run the gamut from shame to pride. When analyzing my childhood environment, I can fully understand why I created and harbored the implicit biases I did. I wish I was able to explain this away by feigning ignorance, but if I'm honest I never made the overture to even remotely try to establish a relationship with any individual of color. There were plenty of times I was in public spaces with children of color, be it a public park, the mall, or the fairground. Even with my extremely outgoing personality it never occurred to me to say hello, or even attempt a conversation. Familial beliefs and conversations kept me firmly entrenched in my White privilege. It was not until high school that those biases were confounded with the addition of the Black population from

the city high school. At the time my immediate reaction and that of White teachers was that loud, boisterous behavior was inappropriate and irritating. “These were the White public-school teachers who were not trained to deal with their whiteness in response to our rich, beautiful colorfulness” (Matias, 2016, p. 12). In reflection I believe the students appeared to be challenging the unspoken rule to act White that was prevalent in those hallways by simply being themselves. Looking back, I can only wonder about the inner turmoil the newly transferred Black students felt. Why should any student not have the right to authentically be themselves? These students had become highly proficient in code switching while at school to fit in with their White counterparts. My recalcitrant attitude toward that new freshman on that first day of my senior year proves I am no different than other privileged White individuals. I wish I could find him and sincerely apologize for my hideous behavior. However, considering I do not even know his name, I will forge forward on my continued growth as an anti-racist educator and ally to hopefully help prevent that situation from happening to someone else.

Our history is essentially the building block of what and who we become. I’m not stating this is a definitive prediction of future choices and beliefs. However, I realize work has to happen in order to retrain our thoughts and natural reactions. My college years again solidified the lack of Black leaders in education, both as educators and as students. It was a popular belief that Black students attending the University of Iowa were there on sports scholarships and enrolled in the easiest classes. I cannot exactly pinpoint where this belief came from, but it was a popular explanation for the lack of Black students in the classrooms I learned in. I also bought into the common belief and microaggression that Asian students were particularly gifted in math and science. The

university reinforced this misnomer, as most of my math and science professors were of Asian descent, and my roommate's actuarial science professors were all Asian. Looking back, it is painfully obvious this stereotypical belief was not only present at the student level, but also at the institutional level as well (James, 2016). This was reflected in their hiring practices. Even as I attended graduate classes for my two Masters, it was painfully apparent that White men and women were the dominant professors. I believe it is imperative to address this practice of favoring White faculty in all educational institutions ranging from Kindergarten through higher level academia.

Throughout this study it was apparent that deep seeded bias remains entrenched in an individual's psyche. As I take great pride in the amount of research and work I have put into understanding how to best educate my students of color, when situations arise that place me on the defensive I find myself reverting back to harmful thoughts like she's just an angry Black woman or she's crazy (Harris-Perry, 2011). I am slowly learning to not react in a defensive manner with quick verbal comebacks defending my position. Instead, I am conditioning myself to take deep breaths and listen to understand and not listen to react. In all honesty, there are times where my heart races and I feel deep dislike toward the individual with whom I'm interacting. I find myself offended when someone tells me I am the problem by simply being a White woman as I tirelessly work to be an ally and a safe place for students in my building.

A specific example stands out clearly in my mind. I was asked recently to give a short presentation of my current academic work. I had defended and passed my proposal after a long journey and felt confident in my content and study. There was some trepidation on my part, as I recognized a Black female in the audience that I had

previously met. She frequently voiced her opinion and frustration with White teachers and the overall discriminatory behavior toward Black families in the public-school setting. This was something I agreed with, as my own work was focusing on my journey to becoming an anti-racist teacher myself. This same topic had been discussed a few months prior with a Black teammate of mine whom I had collaborated with on how to combat this exact issue in our building. However, something about these interactions felt personal to me. As DiAngelo discussed (2018), White individuals frequently take offense to these difficult conversations, but I forced myself to try to hear them clearly and deconstruct the meaning of their statements. Historically, when I had been faced with situations like this I had taken notes so I could revisit the conversation later with a clear head. I can in no way understand the personal vantage point of these women or comprehend their experiences in public education. All I can do is try to listen and learn on how I can challenge myself to be a better ally. The need to have difficult conversations about White bias and racism, is always present.

As a nation we have gone through enormous turmoil and Black heartbreak by the number of Black lives lost in situations that never should have happened. Conversations about how to bridge this racial divide are touched on, but there continues to be chaos and misunderstanding on both sides. This of course is my own opinion that I have formulated through research, conversations with colleagues, family and friends. Whiteness continues to be a reigning force on a global level (Anderson, 2016). Educational gaps between Black students and their White counterparts remain while discipline disparities continue to plague Black and Brown students, which directly feed the school-to-prison pipeline (Schiff, 2013). Microaggressions are a daily part of Black lives and the exhaustion for

those individuals is real and soul sucking, making an ordinary workday unbearable at times (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Often, Whites recognize macroaggressions against other races, but fail to see or fully understand the frequent microaggressions of which they are guilty. “Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal interpersonal exchanges in which a perpetrator causes harm to a target, whether intended or unintended. These brief and commonplace indignities communicate hostile, derogatory, and/or negative slights to the target” (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 8). Unless one does extensive research and probing, the chance that one will become educated on this information is slim. I have been incredibly fortunate to interact with Black individuals who have gently corrected me about my missteps and added to my own personal education about microaggressions. This played a direct part in my continued work of becoming an anti-racist educator. For example, learning about the importance and history of Black hair allowed me to fully understand why female students refuse to take off their hoods (Evans-Winters, 2019). This could have easily turned into a battle, which would lead to an office referral for breaking school rules. Instead, I became educated about the situation and learned to recognize it and offer a classroom of understanding and grace. It also prompted me to communicate the situation to other teachers to protect the integrity of that student. Had it not been for my Black colleague I would not have known that. The issue arises when conversations come to a stalemate and communication stops. I was told by that same individual I described earlier that it is not Black people’s responsibility to educate White people. I hear what she is saying.

After journaling and reflecting on the statement that it is not the responsibility of Black individuals to educate White people I am beginning to understand why. To discuss



race causes Black individuals to dig into often deeply painful memories of outrage, fear and trauma that has personally plagued them. This hurt goes back hundreds of years through generations of families. It can recall present pain that encompasses daily microaggressions which build upon each other, oftentimes making a seemingly simple conversation insurmountable (Matias, 2016). It is imperative White people do the necessary work to try to understand the historical and present traumas that Black individuals face. Black anger is part of the learning process when wounds run deep and opening them to educate ignorant White people can rightfully unearth frustration and rage. To begin to embark on the path of knowledge it is prudent White people do the research before expecting a Black individual to do the work for them. I have learned conversation about these historically embedded hurts, requires listening with compassion and placing hurt feelings aside. In order for us as a society to move forward in racial relations it is imperative we have these impossibly difficult conversations in safe settings. Unfortunately, Whiteness continues to favor Whites, and through the oppression of others it allows White individuals to benefit (Leonardo, 2002). Microaggressions will continue, and unless White individuals begin to speak up as allies, this pattern of behavior will continue to plague our Black population and Black students in education.

Through my personal experiences I have recognized the deep desire to be an advocate for change and an ally for Black families and students. I believe one can learn to challenge previous beliefs and engage in deep personal reflection to become a better educator and overall human. This is not an easy process, and like other White individuals, I have and continue to go through the emotional work of recognizing my biases and recognizing my Whiteness. This is not something that happens in a day, week, or year. I

truly believe this is a lifelong process of meaningful conversations, critical thinking, and collaboration across color lines. My specific focus is addressing racism and bias in elementary education, but I feel this work is much larger than that. The reality is 85% of teachers in public education are middle class White women and the minority population continues to grow (Matias, 2016). Ignorance is no longer an option, nor is placing the blame on Black families. There are many components that contribute to a child's experience and ultimate success in education. By addressing issues such as not seeing color and placing children in the hallway as a consequence due to behavior, we can promote an environment that recognizes and celebrates differences. Through intensive training teachers can be educated on how to recognize personal bias and address those feelings. Open and safe conversations with Black colleagues can enlighten White teachers and offer a unique perspective on how to best engage with students and parents. Districts can implement active educator searches for Black teachers which will add diversity and a plethora of racial perspectives. Professional development can be utilized at the district and building level to collaborate with teachers and parents to create racially safe spaces for students. None of these options will be easy if executed correctly. There will be a range of emotions, especially from White teachers who will vehemently argue they are not racist. If we can get past that and be honest, a more united front can be established. Perhaps it is naive of me to hope that someday these racial walls will begin to crumble for the sake of our children and their educational future. I chose to be optimistic based on the amazing personal experiences I have had through personal and collegiate relationships built across color lines that are both honest with a tinge of vulnerability.

Throughout this process I have noticed prevalent themes in my narratives that directly correlate with the literature. My narratives prove that I am no better or different than other ignorant White people living their privileged lives with little thought to how microaggressions and entitlement make life exponentially more difficult for Black individuals. How White's express privilege was painfully obvious in a number of my narratives. The fact that I demanded the Black student be moved out of my locker was an apparent show of privilege. I gave zero thought to his rights or feelings surrounding the matter. To make matters worse I also exhibited entitlement behavior which continued for me as I assumed the scholarships I applied for were rightly mine. I was raised believing that White was the better race and an education with Black students should be avoided at all costs. The entire first half of my existence was steeped in the belief I deserved something simply because I thought myself to be more qualified, or that since I worked hard it was rightfully mine. As the majority of White individuals, I paid no attention to the struggles my Black peers had to persist through to even get to the place that I simply started at because of my privilege. Another glaringly obvious theme is White defensiveness. I am extremely guilty of this in my everyday life. While I recognize my narratives were laced with this theme, I continue to struggle. When Black individuals trust me with showing their raw emotions I need to recognize the conversation is not about me personally, but is a window into the years of hurt and oppression. Growth can only happen if you listen for understanding and not for a defensive response. I have also identified that my narratives are laced with microaggressions. Whether it be my belief that Black students were only at Iowa because they were athletes, to inserting myself into Black spaces and private conversations to satisfy my desire to have friends, I have made

grave errors. Moving forward this is an essential part of being an ally. I must become more sensitive to microaggressions and educate others about these daily onslaughts we as Whites foist upon Black individuals. I consider myself a White ally. I am aware that I am always in the process of becoming an anti-racist. This is a mind-set that continuously needs growth and development. I am committed to participating in the difficult work of daily recognition of my Whiteness and working to deconstruct that so I can make a concentrated effort to fight against the oppression of others.

As I move past this piece of academic work it is imperative I create and maintain a plan on how I will continue on the path toward developing an anti-racist mindset. I am passionate about creating and anti-racist curriculum at the collegiate level where common themes of White mistakes and privilege are addressed. I believe this needs to be a fundamental part of all teacher education, with continual training with public education staff. New teachers entering education will have a basic understanding of how their Whiteness affects their teaching pedagogy and learn to recognize microaggressions in the classroom and plan on how to avoid them. Staff members can confidently become allies for Black students and staff members and have the ability to professionally address witnessed injustices against individuals of color. Not only can I continue to work on being a reliable ally, but I can educate others and call to action others, while using our White voices to advocate for oppressed groups. I am passionate about cross color conversations and collaboration in safe spaces so that I can continue to support and advocate for my students and colleagues. Awareness that these conversations will be difficult is imperative, but through recognizing my White privilege I can use my knowledge to force change in public education for the direct benefit of our students, staff

and families. Through the use of deep daily reflections, I can continue to learn and recognize microaggressions that occur daily. I desire to not only be able to identify these hurtful statements and actions that I unintentionally participate in, but make a significant change in my behavior. This acquired awareness needs to be shared with other White individuals, so that we can ensure a safe and supportive space for our colleagues, families and students.

I am extremely excited about the academic opportunities this degree will afford me. The ability to work in higher education is a goal I have harbored since I was nineteen. I look forward to working with universities to create and teach courses addressing Whiteness and how that directly affects educational disparity in public education. Future teachers must understand the intimate involvement that Whiteness plays in the education of students of color. I believe that collaboration with school districts is necessary to create teacher training where authentic race conversations can happen. I desire to continue to contribute to the literature on how Whiteness is directly harming our students of color. The focus needs to be taken off the educational gap between Black students and their White counterparts, as I do not believe the issue lies with the Black students and families. Through continued research and studies, I want to hold educators accountable and turn the focus on implicit biases and teaching pedagogy and how that is hindering our students of color. Lastly, I will participate in personal ongoing growth as an anti-racist educator and individual. I will loudly advocate for equitable education and treatment of students, while sharing my personal journey and findings. White teachers do not wish to admit their bias and racism. However, if they witness another White teacher freely speak about their deeply personal journey, while

noticing points of inflection, I hope that will begin the process of internal reflection in others. From that personal reflection, conversations can be had and strategic plans can be made to address those beliefs and feelings. I am eternally hopeful my autoethnographic journey will resonate with other White teachers and make them begin to interrogate their own lives.

This dissertation has taken me down a multitude of pathways and evoked deep thinking that brought forth invaluable conversations with professors, colleagues, friends and family. Oftentimes I have found that my plight is not received as enthusiastically as I would hope, but as I researched, I recognize most White individuals enjoy the benefits that Whiteness provides. It is not until those feelings are challenged in a constructive and collaborative manner that White individuals can be more open to the possibility that the status quo is not in the best interest of society as a whole. Anger and hurt run hundreds of years deep, and these transgressions against Black individuals need to be addressed and restitution forthcoming. Until I physically narrated transformational moments in my life where I was able to identify certain thoughts and feelings, I was unable to fully comprehend how my anti-racist journey began to unfold. Usually things that are worth doing are not easy in their plight. As my husband frequently tells me, if it were easy then everyone would do it. Being vulnerable in my experiences and thought processes is always risky. However, growth comes from putting yourself out there and simply admitting you don't know, but want to do better. This is where I am in the process. I would be remiss if I stated I don't have negative thoughts, or have to breathe deeply and count to ten when I am challenged on my beliefs and told I am still one of them, just like every other White girl that is part of the problem. I am learning to be more cognizant of

my initial knee jerk thoughts and instead listen for understanding through the hurt and try my best to not be just like every other White girl. I will strive to be an ally. I will work tirelessly to educate others on racism and bias so that tiny ripples turn into bigger ones with a positive outward effect. My work is just beginning; however, I am committed to ongoing growth and individual learning as an advocate so that our Black children have a safe haven in public education that celebrates who they are and how they learn. I can do hard things. We can do hard things. Together we can be unstoppable.

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