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Knowing When to Bounce: A Framework Toward Critical Belonging for African American Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

in

Education

by

Ramon Stephens

Committee in charge:

Professor Thandeka Chapman, Chair
Professor Amanda Datnow
Professor Andrew Jolivette
Professor Makeba Jones

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The dissertation of Ramon Stephens is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2023

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my cherished family, the descendants of enslaved Africans across the global diaspora, and marginalized communities at large who continue to disrupt, resist, and thrive in the face of intersectional white supremacy, systemic inequity, and social injustice.

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List of Abbreviations

CRP: Culturally relevant pedagogy
RIT: Racial identity theory
CRT: Critical race theory

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank God, the universe, my wife, my family and all my ancestors whose resilience, wisdom, sacrifices, and unwavering spirit have laid the foundation for my academic journey. In particular, I extend my deepest heartfelt appreciation to my cherished partner, whose uncompromising love, encouragement, support, and unwavering belief in my abilities have been an unyielding source of strength. I cannot thank you enough or put into words how much your wisdom and selflessness have transformed my life and the world at large. To my beloved family, I am forever indebted for the profound sacrifices you have made and the enduring support you have bestowed upon me, propelling me forward in the pursuit of my academic endeavors.

I express my deepest gratitude and respect to my mentors and Chair, Dr. Thandeka K. Chapman, Dr. Makeba Jones, and Dr. Lindsay Perez-Huber. Dr. Chapman, thank you for your sheer brilliance and consistent guidance that have deeply transformed me and my family, my skillset, and the trajectory of my life beyond my imagination. Words cannot express my gratitude for your leadership, and I could not be more grateful to have had you as a mentor. Dr. Jones, I am also forever grateful for your mentorship. Thank you for demonstrating and modeling what master teaching looks like and how to lead with compassion within the academy. I also want to thank Dr. Lindsay Perez-Huber for supporting me in my master's program and helping to cultivate the pathway that led me to my Ph.D. I cannot thank you all enough for choosing to support me, and I look forward to continuing our collaboration and friendship.

Curriculum Vitae
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Scholarly Interests

Equity, Sense of Belonging, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Multilingual Education, Critical Media Literacy, Critical Race Theory, Racial Identity Theory, Urban Education, Socio-Cultural Theory, Critical Multicultural Education, K-12 Teacher Education, Social Studies Education, and the Role of Race, Identity, and Culture in Teaching and Learning

Education

2023 (September)	Stanford University, Palo Alto, Ca. Post-Doctoral Fellow
2023	University of California San Diego. Ph.D. Education
2016	California State University, Long Beach, Ca. M.A. Social Cultural Analysis of Education
2008	University of Washington, Seattle, WA. B.A. Political Science
2008	University of Washington, Seattle WA. B.A. Comparative History of Ideas

Higher Education Teaching Experience

2020 (Jan) – Present Lead Instructor and Department Advisor. Human Developmental Sciences (HDS) 173, University of California, San Diego, CA. Over three years' experience as lead instructor. This course explores the impact of race, media, and schooling on human development across the life span. It examines the social, linguistic, and cultural impact of media and schooling on racial identity development from birth to adulthood. This required DEI-approved course is particularly interested in the politics of representation within media and schooling and its impact on student achievement and social stratification. The readings, activities, assignments, and small group discussions develop critical forms of literacy that unpack cultural norms, practices, and policies embedded within media and school curricula that reproduce inequity. My responsibilities for this course included creating the courses, teaching the

course, creating the syllabus, and assessment. In this position also advise the department and lead workshops about improving equity, race, and inclusion and how it impacts teaching and learning.

2020 (Jan) – 2022 Lead Instructor, Human Developmental Sciences (HDS) 160, University of California, San Diego. Over three years' experience as lead instructor. This course taught and utilized critical qualitative methods through a participatory action lens to continually improve areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the department of Human Developmental Sciences. Researchers and participants collaborated to understand social issues and take action to bring about positive change that supported both them and their local department. Students not only learned the five steps of qualitative research methods, but they also learned how research methods can be utilized to support student equity and success within schooling. This course was unique in that it centered on student voice and the needs of their local communities, which not only increased student engagement within the course but also made traditional methods of instruction into a culturally responsive tool that could support their undergraduate community and the needs of their department (and University at large) simultaneously.

2021 – Present Associate Instructor in-lieu, Teaching and Learning Commons. In this role, I develop, teach, and train faculty in STEM and the Social Sciences in creating culturally relevant and responsive courses. In this role, I conduct workshops, trainings, classes, and individual consultations across departments on how to foster culturally responsive teaching and anti-racism across all disciplines. I also provide recommendations on recruitment and retention strategies for marginalized communities, particularly students of color. I also helped to develop and facilitate an anti-racist learning community that supports graduate students and faculty engaging in anti-racist work within the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). This learning community offers paid fellowships to support long-term projects that address issues of intersectional racism, lack of cultural responsiveness, and general inequity within their classroom, department, or the University at large. These projects support UCSD DEI initiatives and align with the University of California's principles of community.

2019 Associate Instructor in-lieu, Education Studies, University of California San Diego, CA. Lead instructor for this course. This course looks at the impact of language, culture, and education on school success. This course explores explanations of successes and failures that employ linguistic and cultural variables in Urban environments. This course also explores bilingual education and cultural responsiveness and their impact on student and school outcomes.

2016 – 2019 Teaching Assistant, University of California, San Diego, CA. TA responsibilities include teaching, attending all lectures, meeting with the course instructor, grading papers/exams, and mentoring students. In regard to teaching, I taught and developed a curriculum for a smaller section of the course designed to enhance learning for the main course. I taught approximately 40-90 students weekly to provide increased support for the larger course, which held approximately 120 students. I also guest lectured in the main course on a variety of topics.

Professional Experience

2016 – Present Executive Director (co-founder), The Conscious Kid. The Conscious Kid is a funded 501(c)3 dedicated to supporting healthy racial identity development across all ages. As Executive Director, Ramon is dedicated to supporting families, schools, educators, and organizations in taking action against systemic inequity. Beginning as a small grassroots movement, Ramon has been instrumental in growing this organization into a fully funded and sustainable 501(c)3 with over 2 million followers on social media. Ramon oversees social media growth and content, research and assessment measures, fundraising, product development, and hiring and recruitment. In this role, Ramon raised and oversaw over a $2 million budget, providing over 120,000 books and resources in 3,000 schools across 50 states to support anti-racism and equity across the P-12 pipeline. He also holds speaking engagements and manages ongoing partnerships that provide diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consulting and training with organizations such as Google, Disney, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Janie and Jack, The White House, Pottery Barn, The NFL Players Association, USC Shoa Foundation, MLB Parents Association, and more.

2012 – 2015 Teacher and Director, Street Dreams. Overarching mission and role to increase retention and graduation rates by applying culturally and socially relative practices to underserved communities in Urban environments. Partnered with Title 1 schools and colleges to create afterschool programming and extracurricular courses that supported media literacy production skills and school inclusion for students.

2008 – 2011 Recruiter and Advisor, University of Washington, Bothell Specialized in diversity recruitment and participated in recruitment fairs at high schools, via online sessions, and on-campus events. Delivered keynote presentations to engage students and promote the university. Increased ongoing recruitment efforts while supporting the retention of existing underserved student populations. Spearheaded several partnerships with high schools that became the school’s top feeders, contributing to UW Bothell becoming the most racially diverse among all

three University of Washington campuses. The University of Washington is ranked 8th among the world's top 500 universities by the Academic Ranking of World Universities, with three campuses, 500 buildings, and nearly 43,000 students.

Publications

Rogers, K**.,** Crawford, J., and Stephens, R. (2023). Unveiling the Cloak of Invisibility*: "Because Representation Matters: Supporting Black Males to and Through STEM Graduate School." Why Black males are absent in STEM Disciplines*." Information Age Publishing.

Chapman, T., Jones, M., Stephens, R., Lopez, D., Rogers, K., and Crawford, J. (2020). A Necessary Pairing: Using Academic Outcomes and Critical Consciousness to Dismantle Curriculum as the Property of Whiteness in K–12 Ethnic Studies Equity and Excellence in Education.

Stephens, R. (2019). The Daily Dose: The End to Social Inequity InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 16 (2).

Ishizuka, K.; Stephens, R**.*** (2019). The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy Research on Diversity in Youth Literature, 1(2), 4.

Selected Presentations

Chapman, T; Dixson, A; Stephens, R; Brown, C; McCall, J; James-Gallaway, C. (2023, April). Black at School: Black teachers, Black students, and anti-Black hostilities*in p-20 institutions*. [Conference Panel]. American Education Research Association Convention, Chicago, IL, United States.

Crawford & Stephens (2023). *Sustaining Liberatory Collaborations: Lessons from an Anti-Racist Pedagogy Learning Community* The Black Doctoral Network Western Regional Conference California State University, Los Angeles.

Rogers, K**.;** Stephens, R. (2023). Unveiling the Cloak of Invisibility*: "Because Representation Matters: Supporting Black Males to and Through STEM Graduate School." Why Black males are absent in STEM Disciplines*." Association for the Study of Higher Education. Las Vegas, Nevada.

Rogers, K**.;** Stephens, R. (2022). Unveiling the Cloak of Invisibility*: "Because Representation Matters: Supporting Black Males to and Through STEM Graduate School." Why Black males are absent in STEM Disciplines*." American Educational Research Association. San Diego, California

Rogers, K.; Stephens, R. (2022, June). Unveiling the Cloak of Invisibility*: "Because Representation Matters: Supporting Black Males to and Through STEM Graduate School." Why Black males are absent in STEM Disciplines*." Association for the Study of Higher Education. American Educational Research Association. Gender and Stem Conference Munich, Germany.

Rogers, K., Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Lopez, D., Chapman, T.K., and Jones, M. (2021). Finding and Supporting Each Other: Black Students' Collegiate Experiences American Education Research Association (AERA). Web-based due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Rogers, K., Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Lopez, D., Chapman, T.K., and Jones, M. (2021). Finding and Supporting Each Other: Black Students' Collegiate Experiences Association for the Society for Higher Education (ASHE). Web-based due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Rogers, K., Lopez, D., Chapman, T.K., and Jones, M. (2019). The Power of a Shared Language: Critical Relatability and Student Engagement AERA, Toronto, Canada

Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Rogers, K. Lopez, D., Chapman, T.K., and Jones, M. (2019). "You're Beautiful When You Are Who You Are": Sense of Belonging, Race, and Ethnic Studies. AERA. Toronto, Canada.

Rogers, K. Lopez, D. Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Chapman, T.K., and Jones, M. (2019). "Our Own History, Our Own Legacy": The Actualization of Change Agents Through Ethnic Studies Curricula AERA, Toronto, Canada

Stephens, R., Lopez, D., Rogers, K., Crawford, J., Chapman, T., and Jones, M. (2018). "Sometimes We are Fake:" Ethnic Studies, Trust and Racial Minorities. AERA New York, NY. National Association for Multicultural Education Conference (NAME), San Diego Ca.

Lopez, D., Rogers, K., Stephens, R., Crawford, J., Chapman, T., and Jones, M. (2018). The Rhetoric of an Ethnic Studies Course on Critical Consciousness and Self-Identity AERA. New York, NY.

Ishizuka, I.; Stephens, R. (2018). The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy AERA, New York, NY

Rogers, K., Stephens, R., Lopez, D., Crawford, J., Chapman, T., and Jones, M. (2018). Overcoming Stereotypes: Utilizing Ethnic Studies to Cultivate Self-Love, Self-Efficacy, and Self- Empowerment in Historically Marginalized Youth. AERA. New York, NY.

Chapman, T. K., Stephens R (2018). Exploring High Achieving African American Students' College Choice Processes. International Congress for School Effectiveness and

Improvement. Singapore.

Chapman, T.K., Jones, M., Gallagher-Guertsen, T., and Stephens, R. (2017). The Role of the Scholar Activist in Supporting Grassroots Reforms Reforming Education and the Imperative of Constant Change: Ambivalent Roles of Policy and the Role of Educational Research European Educational Research Association. European Conference on Educational Research (EERA). Copenhagen, Denmark.

Research Experience

2019-2021 Stephens, R.; Black Resource Center: Design Measurements for Black Academic Excellence Initiative. Lead Researcher.

2019-2020 Stephens, R., Rogers, K., Crawford, J.. Black Excellence of Black Irrelevance: An Examination of Black Graduate Experiences at UCSD. Researcher, Grad Division/Office of Equity Diversity, and Inclusion. Grant $15,000

2016-2018 Chapman, T.K., M. Jones., K., Stephens, R. Curricular Innovation to Increase Academic and Mobility Outcomes for Underrepresented Students: Evaluating the Ethnic Studies Reform in San Diego Unified Schools. UCSD Social Sciences Divisional Research; Research Assistant, Ethnic Studies Grant. $24,981

2016-2018 Jones, M, Chapman, T. K., Stephens, R. (2017). Curricular Innovation to Increase Academic and Mobility Outcomes for Underrepresented Students: Evaluating the Ethnic Studies Reform in San Diego Unified Schools. UCSD Campus Academic Senate Research Grant. $14,900

Departmental/University Service

2021 Panelist and Speaker, UC-HBCU Steer Program and Recruitment 2021 Panelist, UCSD Triton Leaders Conference: Advancing Equity in P-16 Education

2020 Keynote Speaker, Faculty EDI Training for Human Developmental Sciences

2019 Committee for Western Association for Schools and Colleges Accreditation

2018 Committee for Washington Association of School and Colleges (WASC) Accreditation 2018 Keynote Speaker, R.I.Z.E. Black/Latinx Recruiting seminar for UCSD Admissions

2018 Career Panelist for Chancellor’s Associates Scholarship Program (C.A.S.P.)

2017 Keynote Speaker, Diversity recruitment seminar for UCSD admissions

2017 Teacher, Garfield High School Critical Media and Spanish

‘ Literature Program

Research Grants, Fellowships, and Teaching Awards.

Stephens, R. (2023) Stanford Baker-Prism Fellowship Fellowships are awarded to Postdoctoral students with an outstanding academic and professional record whose research supports diversity, equity, and inclusion at Stanford University.

Stephens, R. (2020-2021). UC President’s Pre-Professoriate Fellow Awarded to students for outstanding academic achievements, commitment to advancing issues of equity and inclusion, and interest in pursuing a career in the professoriate. $40,000

Stephens, R. (2020). Recipient of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Teaching Award. This award recognizes select faculty and teaching assistants who exemplify high-quality teaching and are committed to educating students about the importance of understanding issues of diversity and equity.

Stephens, R.; Rodgers, K.; Crawford, J. (2019). Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Black Academic Initiative Grant $15,000

Stephens, R., Rodgers, K., Crawford, J. (2019). Graduate Division Supporting Experiences of Black Graduate Students. $15,000

Chapman, T.K., M. Jones., K. 2017). Curricular Innovation to Increased Academic and Mobility Outcomes for Underrepresented Students: Evaluating the Ethnic Studies Reform in San Diego Unified Schools UCSD Social Sciences Divisional Research Grant. $24,981

Jones, M.; Chapman, T. K. (2017). Curricular Innovation to Increase Academic and Mobility Outcomes for Underrepresented Students: Evaluating the Ethnic Studies Reform in San Diego Unified Schools UCSD Campus Academic Senate Research Grant $14,903

Stephens, R. (2016). Strategic Enhancement of Excellence through Diversity Fellowship UC San Diego Graduate Division. Full Scholarship.

Stephens, R. (2015) California Department of Education Academic Achievement Scholarship. California State University, Long Beach. $20,000

Invited Talks, Campus or Departmental Talks

Stephens, R. (2021). *Action Research, Methods, and Activism* Education Studies 140: Introduction to Principles of Learning University of California, San Diego.

Stephens, R. (2021). *Equity, research, and Pathways beyond Higher education.* Education Studies 140: Introduction to Principles of Learning University of California, San Diego.

Stephens, R. (2021). *Child Development, Critical Media Literacy and Anti-Racism.* Education Studies 131: Child Development and Education.

Stephens, R. (2019, 2020). *Social Media, Critical Literacy and Social Activism.* Education Studies 117: Language, Culture and Education. University of California, San Diego.

Stephens, R. (2018). *Sense of Belonging for African American Students in Higher Education* Teaching and Learning Commons' Brown v. Board Commemoration University of California, San Diego.

Stephens, R. (2019). *Research, Cultural Responsiveness and Equity in p-20 Classrooms*. Education Studies 140: Introduction to Principles of Learning University of California, San Diego.

Stephens. R. (2017). *Qualitative Methods Used in Early Childhood Research.* Education Studies 288: Advanced Research and Evaluation Methods, Qualitative Methods. University of California, San Diego.

Stephens, R. (2017). *Critical Literacy Workshop*. San Diego State University, San Diego, CA Stephens, R. (2016). *Race, the History of Logic, and School Culture* Education Studies 126: Social Organization of Education. University of California, San Diego.

Major Media Coverage

Eakins, S. (2023). What Care Should Look Like in Schools. *Leading Equity Podcast*

Corsillo, L. (2022). 17 Kids' Books to Read During Black History Month (and All Year Long). *NY Mag, The Strategist*

Cardona, M. (2021). Interview with the White House, Secretary Cardona *The Conscious Kid*

Greenwood-Davis, H. (2021). Talking to Kids about Race. *National Geographic Magazine.*

Lowes, K. (2020). The Conscious Kid with Ramon Stephens *Katie's Crib: Shondaland Audio and iHeartRadio*

Segran, E. (2020). 3 experts on how to raise anti-racist kids. *Fast Company Magazine.*

Saad, L. (2020). Parenting through a Critical Race Lens *The Good Ancestor Podcast*

Gillette, S. (2019). Dr. Seuss Books Like Horton Hears a Who! Branded Racist and Problematic in New Study. *People Magazine*.

Jenkins, T.; Yamosky J (2019). Dr. Seuss Books Can Be Racist, But Students Keep Reading Them. *NPR Code Switch*

Nemec, J. (2019). Children's Books Can Help Start A Conversation About Race. Parents Have to Continue It. *The Washington Post*

Smith, G. (2019). It's Time to Talk About Dr. Seuss. *Teach for Justice.*

Wu. L. (2019). Exploring the World of Dr. Seuss *Forbes Magazine*.

Professional Memberships/Affiliations

2016 - present American Education Research Association (AERA)
2019 - present Association for the Society of Higher Education (ASHE)

Abstract of the Dissertation

Knowing When to Bounce: A Framework Toward Critical Belonging for

African American Students

by

Ramon Stephens

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Thandeka Chapman, Chair

In this dissertation I explored how two equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging in their high-school classrooms through their pedagogical choices and how African-American students perceive these efforts as affecting their overall class

engagement and academic motivation. Using a qualitative case study, I focused on equity minded African-American teachers, and African-American students in their classrooms, to capture the impact of the sociocultural-political-institutional context on African American students' sense of belonging. I employed critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in tandem with qualitative racial identity development theory (RIT) measures (Boston & Warren, 2017) to reconstitute sense of belonging into a sense of critical belonging for African-American students. Critical belonging entails looking at systemic, institutional, and/or interpersonal factors that impact belonging based on what African-American students need in order to thrive and feel respected. Overall, this study found that employing criticality through racial realism, challenging dominant ideology (for example anti-Blackness and race neutrality within curriculum and teacher training), the cultivation of counter spaces, employing intersectionality, disrupting property of whiteness, and creating institutional forms of support that is intentional in centering and supporting critical and intersectional understandings of race, anti-Blackness, and African American identity were found to support belonging for African American students.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A sense of belonging is a basic human need. Many researchers regard this need as being equal to the necessity for food, water, and shelter (Booker, 2006; Brooms, 2019; Graham et al., 2022). When students experience belonging in school, they are more likely to identify with the school and have better academic outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2018; Willms, 2003). Positive academic outcomes stemming from belonging include, but are not limited to, the development of academic aspirations, higher rates of high-school and college attendance, and increased levels of student engagement and learning (Chavous et al., 2003; Chavous et al., 2008; Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Osterman, 2000). Despite the ongoing developments in the research on belonging, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the intersection of race, belonging, and student achievement in schooling, particularly for African American students (Boston & Warren, 2017; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

This study seeks to explore the connection between race and belonging for African-American students. Prior research, although minimal, has documented race (otherwise referred to as "racial centrality") as the most stable predictor of African-American students' belonging (Boston & Warren, 2017). Although prior research has noted the impact of race on African-American belonging, there is minimal research documenting specific practices to leverage race, and/or intersectional understandings of race, to support African-American belonging. A sense of belonging has been linked to positive academic outcomes for all students, including historically marginalized communities such as African Americans (Boston & Warren, 2017). According to Waldron and McKenzie (2008), multiple oppressions exist in the lives of racialized people. Researchers have observed that belonging can help buffer and protect against post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stemming from these multiple forms of oppression (Waldron &

McKenzie, 2008). Polk et al. (2018) and Hill (2022) also found that when belonging included a sense of community and positive cultural affirmations for marginalized populations, it protected or buffered against racialized forms of trauma. However, it is important to be critical of the pathologizing of race and the centering of health issues (for example, racial trauma) as the source of educational problems rather than a nexus of social inequity, historical white supremacy, and embedded systemic racism within the school system. Cultivating spaces of belonging requires an understanding of the social and political context it is situated within, particularly for African-Americans and marginalized communities.

The need to belong is present in all humans and cultures. However, there are cultural and individual differences in the assumptions behind the need for belonging (for example, whom or what someone needs to belong to), the institutional layers in which belonging is experienced (or not), and how people interpret the actions of others as offering belonging and acceptance in different environments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The centering of identity and the socio-political-context of power that it is situated within, such as historic forms of systemic inequity, is a key aspect in reconceptualizing belonging for historically marginalized communities (Boston & Warren, 2017; DeNicolo et al., 2017). For example, fostering belonging in Muslim transnational communities differs from the common psychosocial assumptions of belonging that are rooted in supporting student wellbeing. Fostering belonging for Muslim transnational students is deeply political (that is, impacted by policies that create inequities) and requires the challenging and disruption of systemic barriers (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; DeNicolo et al., 2017). In addition to understanding psychological and social wellbeing, inroads must be built toward addressing institutional and systemic barriers (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011 Boston & Warren, 2017).

Sense of belonging has a long history in education research, and emergent scholarship has begun to broach the connection between identity, social inequity, and sense of belonging. As mentioned earlier, few studies have examined the complexities of identity by utilizing race as an institutional mechanism to affirm or negate belonging. Although prior research has documented a sense of belonging across races and between non-African-American students and African-American teachers, there appears to be a gap in equity-minded African-American teacher representation, African-American student voice, and African-American authorship while examining what belonging looks like for African-American students (Booker, 2006; D'amico et al., 2017). Asset-based research that documents African-American student experiences and belonging, guided by critical African-American scholars, also remains minimal. Although there is a plethora of research by Black scholars on the various ways to support Black students, scholarship centered on the phrase and framework "sense of belonging" remains minimal. It is important to note that the few Black scholars who specialize in belonging have been instrumental in documenting the impact of race on African-American belonging.

This study examines how teachers of color cultivate a sense of belonging in their high-school classrooms through their pedagogical choices and how African-American students perceive these efforts as affecting their sense of belonging, overall class engagement, and academic motivation. Using a qualitative case study design focused on African-American teachers and the African-American students in their classrooms, I seek to capture the impact of the socio-political institutional context and teaching pedagogy on belonging.

In this study, I document how equity-minded African-American teachers support and cultivate a sense of belonging for African-American students. By writing from the "inside out,"

as an African-American scholar, and centering social justice and strengths-based education from within the African-American community, I explore the unique experiential knowledge, cultural nuances, and experiences of African-American students and educators in multicultural and multi-racial classroom settings. A large body of research on belonging, pertaining to the African-American experience, is by non-African-American researchers and disproportionately centers deficits while referring to African-American students (Booker, 2006). By centering African-American voices—African-American teachers, administrators, leadership, student experiences, and researchers—I am expanding prior research through the inclusion of experiential knowledge, alongside rigorous scholarship in the field, while examining strategies to support belonging for African-American students.

As part of my analysis, I employed critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in tandem with qualitative racial identity theory (RIT) measures (Boston & Warren, 2017). I compliment Boston and Warren's (2017) research with a CRT lens to address the socio-political institutional context of belonging not captured by RIT. To understand the ways in which teaching strategies facilitate a healthy connection between race and belonging, I further employ a CRP lens to document a teacher's cultural competence while working in African-American and multicultural settings (Diller & Moule, 2005). In essence, I attempt to reconceptualize what belonging looks like for African-American students, to contribute to the limited scholarship on African-American belonging from critical African-American scholars and to provide tools that all teachers can use to support African-American students.

Statement of the Problem

Historically as well as at present, American institutions rooted in white supremacy have

created various laws, policies, and practices that negate belonging and marginalize the educational experiences of African Americans. If students do not experience belonging, they are at a higher risk of being removed from the educational pipeline (Owolabi, 2018). African-American students cannot experience belonging if they are pushed out of the academic pipeline.

The exclusion of African-American students (and African-American culture) from American academia is demonstrated through college attendance rates, discipline policies, and a lack of enriching school environments. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2023) reported that the college enrollment rate for African-American students who enter immediately after completing high school (GED recipients included) was 57%. Additionally, African-American students constitute 15.7% of the undergraduate population, and in 2017, only 33% of African-American adults aged 25–29 years reported having at least a two-year college degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Disciplinary policies and practices represent significant contributing factors to the lower rates of African-American student achievement. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions decrease students' time in learning environments. Now, a key component of a sense of belonging is the time spent in a supportive environment. In comparison with their non-African-American counterparts, African-American students often spend less time in the classroom due to the disproportionate levels of exclusionary discipline policies and school practices. Research shows that African-American students are disproportionately suspended and disciplined in school, more so than their white counterparts. African-American children represent 19% of the nation's preschool population; yet, they represent 47% of the overall preschool suspension rate. According to the 2018 report by the Accountability Office (GAO) (2018), African-American students are nearly twice as likely to be suspended and 3.8 times as likely to receive one or

more out-of-school suspensions as white students. Recent research reported that 26% of African American students received at least one suspension for a minor infraction over the course of the three years; this was the case for only 2% of white students (Toro & Wang, 2022). Students cannot experience belonging in classrooms if they are pushed out of them..

Eurocentric curricula and attacks on culturally responsive teaching push African-American students, histories, and cultures out of academia. Eurocentric education continues to dominate the curricular landscape at a national level in the U.S. Within the diverse landscape of the U.S., it denies the core tenets of culturally relevant teaching (specifically cultural competence and critical consciousness) that are necessary to create a rich learning environment that supports both academic engagement and the cultural identity of African-American students. Historically, U.S. public Eurocentric education sought social control to sustain a white supremacist/anti-Black social order by distributing sociocultural expectations through a Eurocentric curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Woodson, 1933/2017; Zamudio et al., 2011). African-American students are less likely to view their classroom environments as positive and enriching when the courses are not culturally responsive or relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Ladson-Billings (1994) used the phrase "culturally relevant teaching" to describe the pedagogy of successful teachers of African-American students. She described this approach to teaching as one "that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18).

Centering African-American Teachers

Teachers of color, including African-American teachers, employing social justice

pedagogy often demonstrate high levels of multicultural awareness, stemming from experiential knowledge, which aligns with a culturally responsive classroom environment for African-American students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Equity-minded African-American teachers offer unique cultural intuition and experiential knowledge to enhance culturally responsive content and serve as role models, particularly for African-American students (King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, with 16,810 student–teacher dyads, researchers found that African-American teachers held higher expectations than non-African-American teachers for their African-American students and that these expectations impact African-American student success (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015).

African-American students taught by high-performing social justice-oriented African-American teachers are more likely to report a desire to attend college and state that their teachers care for and motivate them (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). As a related mechanism, implicit and unconscious anti-Black biases influence teachers' perceptions of student behavior, ultimately accounting for higher levels of exclusionary discipline experienced by African-American students (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; England & Meier, 1985). Administrative data collected from a 2007–2008 North Carolina sample of elementary-, middle-, and high-school students revealed that African-American students taught by supportive, critical African-American teachers had fewer office referrals for misconduct compared to African-American students taught by white teachers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Hundley (1965) is among the earliest African-American researchers to document high-quality African-American-led schools before their dissipation, which led to many African-American teachers being terminated or relocated and African-American students being integrated into white schools due to Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas (1955). In

Hundley's (1965) study, Dunbar High School was a high-performing, segregated, low-income all-African-American institution. Despite facing systemic obstacles, Dunbar excelled, with many students outperforming better-resourced local white schools (Walker, 2000). Although Dunbar produced many successful graduates, its positive impact could have been further amplified if the school had access to equal resources. Hundley (1965) discussed the ways in which Dunbar produced so many notable graduates, including senators, judges, congresswomen, superintendents, and mayors. Dunbar alumni include the first African-American woman to receive a Ph.D. from an American institution, the first African-American male to graduate from Annapolis, the first African-American federal judge, the first African-American general, and the first African-American cabinet member (Hundley, 1965; Sowell, 2016). Although Hundley (1965) never used the phrase "sense of belonging," many of the antecedents surrounding high-achieving student experiences align with Boston and Warren's (2017) indicators for African-American belonging, such as racial centrality and high personal and external regard. Hundley (1965) provided some of the earliest evidence that identifies the strengths of equity-minded African-American teachers and education spaces.

Although rigorous qualitative research can be generated through out-group research, there are limitations in that out-group members do not have access to the various forms of cultural capital gained through experiential knowledge (Yosso, 2005). Experiential knowledge yields nuances in the daily experiences, resiliencies, and strengths of a community (Adams & Walker-Barnes, 2022). Rather than adding the perspective of communities of color to a Eurocentric story, experiential knowledge centralizes the experiences and narratives of people experiencing marginalization, thereby legitimizing them as evidence to challenge and reframe dominant narratives about race, culture, language, and citizenship (Tintango-Cubales et al.,

2015). The dominance of deficit- based belonging research pertaining to African-American students by non-African-American researchers is a larger reflection of which communities do not have access to telling their own stories and underlines the need for strengths-based scholarship rooted in experiential knowledge to help triangulate the understanding of African-American belonging.

Research Objectives

This study centers on the underrepresented and often marginalized expertise and cultural knowledge of critical African-American educators that can be used to enhance and add nuance to the field of belonging. This recognition of experiential knowledge paired with criticality, peer-reviewed scholarship, training, and field expertise in the understanding of both race and equity provides a holistic, nuanced understanding of race that is unique to social-justice African-American educators and educators of color. This study also aims to explore the historical relationship between race, identity, and belonging for African-American students.

Although RIT identifies racial centrality as a primary indicator of belonging for African-American students, it is limited in providing specific information about how centrality is cultivated. This study aims to expand upon Boston and Warren's (2017) seminal findings by highlighting specific policies, practices, and curricular strategies that can foster and/or cultivate centrality.

Finally, this study aims to create a strengths-based project that challenges deficient narratives while discussing African-American experiences. Academia and publishing have a long history steeped in white supremacy, colorblindness, and exclusion, which have traditionally marginalized, appropriated, co-opted, and/or misrepresented the experiences of

marginalized communities, people of color, and African Americans primarily for the benefit of the researcher and not the participants. This study aims to provide strengths-based research strategies to support African-American teachers, students, and researchers within academia.

Research Questions

The following questions will be used to guide the study:

1). What does a sense of belonging look like for African-American students?

2). How does race factor into belonging for African-American students?

3). How do African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging for African American students?

4). How does racial identity influence the pedagogy of African-American teachers?

Significance of the Study

This study aims to not only document what belonging looks like for African Americans but also explore the connection between race and belonging for African-American students. A large body of research outlines the deficits while discussing African-American student experiences, often without providing any strategies to support student agency. This study documents assets, counters deficits, and provides strategies to support racial centrality (a primary indicator of belonging) for African-American students. It also contributes to the field of belonging theoretically, methodologically, and representationally.

This study provides much-needed strengths-based research by and about African-American students and teachers in terms of belonging. In the existing literature, a minimal amount of research has examined the intersections of race and belonging, particularly for

African-American students (Booker, 2006; Boston & Warren, 2017). Of the studies that have discussed race and belonging, very few have explored race through a strengths-based lens. This study utilizes critical African-American experiential knowledge available within the authorship, methodologies, and participants of the study. By writing from the inside out, or from the position of an African American, and centering researchers and educators from within the African-American community, I seek to document unique strengths, nuances, and experiential knowledge, paired with scholarly expertise, in how belonging is cultivated for African-American students.

This study aims to resist harmful dominant ideologies, such as the commonly held myths and/or deficit narratives surrounding African-American communities and communities of color at large and their disposition toward schooling. This includes colorblind, deficient assumptions surrounding low-income African-American learning environments (Coleman et al., 1966). This study not only demonstrates the unique assets that African-American educators bring to learning environments but also outlines why schools and districts should hire, support, retain, and develop African-American educators. This research counters the deficit narratives surrounding low-income communities of color, showing that high levels of belonging can exist within communities deemed "at risk." These stereotypes are countered by demonstrating the assets that African-American students bring into predominately low-income racially and socially diverse classrooms. Moreover, the study shows readers how African-American social-justice teachers utilize and build upon cultural and familial strengths to generate a sense of belonging that translates into African-American student engagement and excellence.

This study highlights clear strategies, policies, and curricular practices that foster racial centrality and belonging. It confirms and expands upon Hundley's (1965) and Boston and

Warren's (2017) findings about race, belonging, and African-American students and teachers. Boston and Warren's (2017) seminal findings posit that racial centrality, or the dominance of race in one's self-concept, is the strongest predictor of African-American student belonging. They demonstrated that to cultivate a strong sense of belonging for African-American students, schools must be aware of the impact of race on these students' self-concept. While Boston and Warren's (2017) findings are seminal, they are limited in providing clear strategies and practices to support African-American students' self-concept.

Theoretically, this study also expands upon Boston and Warren's (2017) findings by analyzing belonging through the lens of CRT. CRT reveals how institutional and structural practices and policies shape belonging for African-American students. Using a CRT framework, I investigate the possibility of transforming the relationship between law and racial power; more broadly, I pursue a project of achieving racial emancipation and anti-subordination (Crenshaw et al., 1994). This is significant as very few studies on belonging have critically examined theoretical underpinnings while discussing race and belonging; moreover, experiences of race and belonging are not situated within a larger framework of white supremacy ideology, historical and systemic racism, and social inequity.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the field of belonging through the use of qualitative data and the inclusion of high-school students and teachers as participants. Research on belonging has traditionally been dominated by quantitative research methods (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Booker, 2006; St-Amand et al., 2017). Moreover, there is even less research that specifically centers on African-American students (Booker, 2006). Qualitative methods, such as the use of counter narratives in interviews, are suited to the exploration of the complex lives of humans who experience the daily intersections of racism, sexism, and classism (Solorzano &

Yosso, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Qualitative methods are also warranted for this study because in order to understand complex intersectional phenomena such as race, belonging, and African-American student experiences, the multiple "realities" experienced by the participants themselves—the "insider" perspectives—must be documented (Flick, 2014). This work of research provides not only a qualitative lens to view African-American belonging but also a much-needed qualitative protocol that can be used for future research.

Challenges involving African-American students' sense of belonging may be connected to a lack of access to equity-minded African-American teachers This is due to the one-way integration policies following Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 and 1955, which resulted in African-American schools being shut down en masse and many African-American teachers being terminated (Fairclough, 2004; Walker, 1996). In part, the decision of one-way integration following Brown v. Board of Education, which entailed the inclusion of African-American students into white spaces as opposed to a mutual integration, was based on the false belief that African-American education spaces and teaching were inferior. These stereotypes about African-American educators and educational spaces, low-income spaces, and schools of color still persist. African-American teachers remain underrepresented in the field of education, and although 13% of the U.S. population is Black, only 7% of all public school teachers are Black. According to Gershenson et al (2018), "if Black students have at least one Black teacher prior to third grade, they're 13 percent college. With two Black teachers, they are 32 percent more likely to go to college. For low-income Black boys, their on-time high school graduation rate climbs by nearly 40 percent" (El-Mekki, 2021; Gershenson et al., 2018). This study aims to provide firsthand experiences of the value that African-American teachers offer to aid the belonging of African-American students as well as all students in general.

Complicating the general conceptualizations of a sense of belonging in school, or students' need to belong for experiencing academic success, is aimed at challenging longstanding inequities, including stereotypes and deficit beliefs about African-American academic spaces (DeNicolo, 2017. A large body of research on belonging views belonging as an interpersonal framework that centers on student well-being (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011). The primary significance of this study is to explicate the need to pair criticality with an understanding and resistance to structural-historical-social inequity while supporting belonging for marginalized students. This can also be viewed as employing a sense of critical belonging.

Definition of Terms

This section provides the definitions for academic terminology used throughout this study. The terms defined below are fundamental in articulating and understanding what critical belonging is and how it is cultivated for African-American students.

1. Criticality: This is an understanding of how intersections of power impact marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1988; Darder, 1995; Howard, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006).
2. Racial centrality: This implies the impact of an individual's race on their self-concept (Boston & Warren, 2017). Boston and Warren (2017) found that centrality was the primary indicator of belonging for African-American students. Since the centrality of race is stable across situations, it is measured by an individual's perception of self with respect to race across various situations.
3. General sense of belonging: According to Booker (2006), a sense of belonging denotes a feeling of relatedness and/or connection with others. Within schools,

across the P-20 pipeline, belonging can be seen as an experience of community, social bonds, identity, and/or academic competence (Hughes, Karp, & O'Gara, 2009). Belonging involves feeling empowered, valued, needed, and accepted. It is a perception that one's characteristics align with, connect, or complement a system or environment (Goodenow, 1993a; Hagerty et al., 1992). Additional terms that are interchangeable with "belonging" throughout this paper are "sense of community" and "connection" They are defined below:

a) *Sense of community*: It is a feeling that members have of belonging—a feeling that the members' identities matter to one another and to the group. It is a shared faith that members' needs will be met and advocated for through a commitment to one another (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000).

b) *Connection*: It is the extent to which students feel their identity is personally accepted, respected, included, and supported (Goodenow, 1993).

4. Academic success: It is the evidence of student learning and/or student engagement.
5. Cultural competence: It is a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable teachers to work effectively with students in cross-cultural settings (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2008).
6. Critical consciousness: It is a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows participants to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). It is demonstrated when students can use the skills they have learned to better understand and critique how intersections of power impact their social position and context (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

7. Intersectional white supremacy: Mills (1997) defined white supremacy as a political system that structures American racism, denoting the global structure of white supremacy and the unique ways it manifests in the U.S. (Bell, 2019; Mills, 1997). Mills (1997) asserted that white supremacy is a political system that outlines a hierarchical power structure, presenting written and unwritten rules to determine who gets what and maintain an unequal distribution of rights and resources to sustain white supremacy. Race and racism, or in this context, white supremacy, is a master category comprising interlocking forms of oppression that include, but are not limited to, patriarchy, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, transphobia, religious racism, ableism, Islamophobia, and anti-environmentalism, to name a few (Crenshaw, 1991; Omi and Winant, 1986). According to Omi and Winant (1986), race encapsulates interlocking forms of identity as it was first created to establish the regimes of hierarchy, inequity, and difference in the U.S.

8. Whiteness: It is defined as a socially constructed set of rules, laws, norms, attitudes, cultural practices, and biases that are rooted in colonial history, benefitting and affording privilege to white people or people who align with the white middle-class cultural norms in the U.S.

9. Counter spaces: These are spaces that disrupt hegemonic and oppressive structures, including racial deficits, and help establish and maintain a positive racial and equitable school climate (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solorzano et. al, 2000). In this

study, space, or its construction, is demonstrated in physical, institutional, and curricular terms.

10. Counter stories: These are tools used in qualitative research to expose, analyze, disrupt, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial power and privilege (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013).

Limitations

The scope of this research centers on African-American experiences; therefore, the findings may not apply to or be scalable to different racial student groups. This study represents a particular selection of African-American teachers who are "social-justice-oriented," "equity-minded," and/or "critical." It is important to note that there are African-American teachers who have low expectations of African-American students and reify anti-Black hierarchies within the classroom (Morris, 2005). These educators, however, are often not equity-minded or not trained in social-justice education. I have intentionally used "social justice," "equity-minded," or "critical" prior to African-American educators rather than simply considering all African-American educators because all educators, including African-American educators, can internalize anti-Blackness from the larger social landscape and reify white supremacy through problematic teaching practices. It is important to pair experiential knowledge with critical consciousness and strengths-based scholarship to minimize the reproduction of anti-Blackness and inequity. Additionally, there is no monolithic tone, expression, or understanding of African-American students' experiences. This study is merely a glimpse into the many possible ways one can conceptualize belonging for African-American students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Very little research has documented the evolution of belonging and its connection with race or African-American student experiences (Booker, 2007). Furthermore, researchers of belonging seem to know little about how African-American educators have cultivated belonging for African-American students. A large amount of research connecting African-American student experiences with belonging centers deficits as opposed to strengths and has been conducted by non-African Americans. Thus, there is a lack of strengths-based research documenting high levels of belongingness for African Americans. Tools, strategies, and recommendations pertaining to how to consistently cultivate high levels of belonging remain scant for African-American students due to the disproportionate amount of research that focuses on documenting deficits in African-American schooling experiences rather than outlining strategies that have been shown to support belonging for African-American students.

This review provides an overview of the research focused on African-American students' sense of belonging. First, I will discuss the conceptual framework guiding both the literature review and my completed empirical research study. Next, I will review relevant literature and organize the findings pertaining to the research questions that are guiding the study. Following a discussion on prior research on belonging and its connection to my research questions, I will discuss the gaps, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

The frameworks that guide this study and the literature review consist of RIT, CRT, and CRP. RIT will be used to code data and identify the relationships between belongingness, racial identity, and African-American student experiences. CRT will be utilized to identify the

structural, historical, political, and contextual factors that impact belonging and the conceptualization of belonging for African-American students. A CRP framework will help identify how a teacher's pedagogy, cultural competence, and student achievement increase African-American student belonging.

Racial Identity Theory (RIT)

Boston and Warren (2017) was the first to identify three indicators of RIT that support a sense of belonging specifically for African-American students. These three indicators are the centrality of race, private regard, and public regard. The original methodology was developed by RIT researchers Sellers et al. (1998), an all-African-American research team. Boston and Warren (2017) found that the centrality of race is the most stable predictor of a sense of belonging for African-American students (2017). The centrality of race, or centrality, is the impact of the dominance of race on a student's self-concept (Boston & Warren, 2017). African-American students who experience high racial centrality—that is, content about race—have a positive impact on their self-concept—maintain stronger resilience against racial discrimination, feel more connected to their classroom community, and perform better at school (Boston & Warren, 2017). This is in alignment with the research that posits that belonging cultivates both value in education and the ability to learn healthy coping skills when experiencing intense and painful emotions due to marginalization (Anderman, 2003; Goodenow, 1993a; Hall, 2014; Osterman, 2000;). Research by Lynn et al. (1999) corroborates these findings, demonstrating a positive correlation between racial identity development, school achievement, and feelings of self-efficacy. Private regard includes perceptions of how one views their own racial identity (Boston & Warren, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). Public regard is the extent to which non-African

Americans feel positively or negatively toward African Americans (Boston & Warren, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). The two later indicators have some association with African-American student belonging but are not as consistent in predicting African-American student belonging as racial centrality. Boston and Warren (2017) is the only African-American researcher I found who created a framework that specifically centers the terminology of belonging for African-American students; therefore, there were a limited number of research citations. RIT is used to identify the primary indicators of supporting belonging for African-American students. However, it is limited in providing specific information, including teacher practices and the way social, historical, and institutional factors can or may be repositioned to foster African-American belonging (or centrality).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Teachers and belonging)

CRP is a framework created by Gloria Ladson-Billings. In this study, CRP provides awareness about the strategies that teachers can employ while cultivating belongingness. Ladson-Billings (1995b) described CRP as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." Research indicates that when teaching pedagogy is relevant to student experiences and resonates with students' cultural experiential knowledge, they experience higher levels of engagement and show greater academic achievement. An educator employing CRP must undertake the development of student learning and academic performance, the development of students' cultural competence, and the development of critical consciousness in students (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Morrison et al., 2008).

In this study, I use a CRP lens to identify the intentional aspects of the teachers' cultural

competence and examine how they use CRP to cultivate African-American student belonging. I also identify how teachers use course content and instruction to develop African-American students' engagement and sense of belonging Teachers apply their critical consciousness to increase academic rigor and grow transformative leaders (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). The development of student learning and academic performance refers to what students know and are able to do as a result of their pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2023). In developing student learning, culturally relevant teaching considers the purpose of teaching a certain curriculum, what larger purpose it serves, and how it helps support students in navigating issues in their daily lives and in the larger world. Ladson-Billings (2023) posits that over and over students ask and are asked why are we doing this, why is this important, and how does this enrich my life and/or the life others? Fostering culturally relevant learning often involves the connection of course content to real-life examples that intersect with students' lives. Ladson-Billings (2006) found that connecting course content to real-life contemporary examples and themes that students are familiar with helps bring the classroom come alive and engage students in active learning. While considering long-term learning goals and objectives, student learning is connected to social awareness in that teachers must ask themselves the ethical question of how course objectives connect, buffer, ignore, and/or increase historical social inequities.

Social and political awareness, referred to as "critical consciousness" by Ladson-Billings (2006), is the second pillar of CRP. Critical consciousness refers to a student and/or teacher's ability to recognize and disrupt various forms of social inequity. Critical consciousness can be understood as a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows participants to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain historical social

inequities such as white supremacy and systemic racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Critical consciousness urges students and teachers to critically think about how structural power intersects with students' educational experiences. It serves to buffer against the reproduction of historical inequities within the classroom, which ultimately creates a welcoming environment for all student communities.

Cultural competence refers to helping students recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006). It entails being trained in the cultural practices of the dominant culture, understanding the ways in which it instantiates oppression in students' lives (and on marginalized student groups in general), and engaging that culture to effect meaningful change. It can be demonstrated through a system of behaviors, attitudes, practices, and norms that enable teachers to work effectively with students in cross-cultural settings (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Cultural competence, along with critical consciousness, must be demonstrated by both the teacher and the student.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Theoretically, CRT enhances RIT by including a discussion on how structural and institutional components impact students' sense of belonging. CRT identifies how structural, institutional, social, and/or political factors historically shape the educational experiences of marginalized communities (Bell, 1987; Solorzano et al., 2005). For this study, I will employ a CRT lens to understand how current political and contextual factors shape African-American students' sense of belonging in schools. A large body of research documents qualitative critical race methodology as particularly useful in understanding how historical, social, political, and

institutional contexts manifest, reify, and reproduce structures of race, racism, and anti-Blackness (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). To understand how African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging and how African-American students embrace belonging, CRT examines the institutional and structural barriers, opportunities, and access points that allow schools and teachers to cultivate belonging for African-American students.

I first use a CRT lens to analyze how structural, institutional, social, and political contexts impact African-American students' experiences. I then discuss concepts from CRT that will be included in my theoretical framework. These concepts include racial realism, colorblindness, the challenging of dominant ideology, counternarratives and spaces, intersectionality, and experiential knowledge.

CRT Concepts

Research demonstrates that racism, social inequity, and white supremacy are embedded across various U.S. social institutions and cultural norms, including schools (Haynes, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). While attempting to understand how to create and support a sense of belonging for African-American students, educators must acknowledge and understand how power, race, and privilege have historically and continually shaped the schooling experiences of African Americans (Bell, 1987; Booker, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2000). The concepts of CRT that are highlighted here were selected for their alignment with the research questions stated earlier in the paper. The concepts that will be explored include racial realism, the embeddedness of race and white supremacy, the challenging of the dominant ideology, colorblindness, counter narratives and spaces, intersectionality, and experiential knowledge.

Racial Realism and the Embeddedness of Race and Racism

Racial realism, which is the acknowledgment of the embeddedness of race and racism in the U.S., is necessary for practitioners, educators, and stakeholders to understand and embrace in order to develop realistic and applicable strategies that acknowledge how race and inequity uniquely impact the African-American student experience (Bell 1992; Chapman, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Everett, 2015). Bell (1992) found that racial realism is necessary because it identifies the structural (and interpersonal) persistence of racism, even in the face of apparent progress. He believed that acknowledging the continued presence of racism can help motivate a more proactive and transformative approach to social and legal change. In the context of education, racial realism (through an intersectional lens) is used to acknowledge how various forms of social and structural inequity are embedded within the school system.

Social inequity and systemic racism are shown to be deeply embedded in the education system, as evidenced by, but not limited to, curriculum, teacher practices, access to advanced courses (i.e., school tracking), and schooling norms, among other factors (Dixson et al., 2006). The invisibility, or stereotypical representation, of marginalized voices within the curriculum contributes to the maintenance of systemic racism and social inequities (López, 2019). The lack of diverse cultures, experiences, and histories within the school curriculum not only reinforces the erasure of students of color (alongside their histories, cultures, and strengths) but also leads to the reinforcement of harmful biases and stereotypes against African-American students, which are absorbed by all student groups from the larger social landscape (Ladson-Billings, 2019; Tatum, 2017). Teacher practices also play a role in the perpetuation of systemic racism and social inequities in schools. For example, studies have shown that teachers tend to have lower expectations of students of color, particularly African-American students, leading to unequal

treatment and outcomes (Delpit, 2012). Additionally, teacher biases can also impact student placement in tracking, leading to the marginalization of students of color (Oakes, 1995). For example, African-American students are disproportionately placed in lower-level academic tracks due to discrimination and teacher biases (Green, 2019). White middle-class cultural norms, which are often juxtaposed against African-American cultural norms, are also embedded within the culture of schooling, which further perpetuates disparities (Howard & Milner, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2023; Skeggs, 2004; Sleeter, 2001; Reay, 2008). For example, the privileging of standardized western linguistic practices and a Eurocentric curriculum create a limited learning atmosphere where the linguistic and cultural identities of African-American students (and students of color) are devalued, leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalization (Rickford et al., 2000; Tyson, 2002; Banks, 2015).

Harris (2000) demonstrated that choosing not to acknowledge the cause and effect of racial power and adopting a vow of silence is one response to inequity, but it is not effective in remedying or addressing issues of racial inequity that impact African Americans. Critical race theorists believe that even when race goes unnamed in the creation of laws and policies, the realities of racism mean that race remains visible through the structured practices, dissemination of resources, and disproportionate outcomes for African Americans (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Chapman, 2013; Harris, 2000; Yosso, 2005). The entrenchment of systemic racism, which negates the primary belonging indicator of racial centrality, highlights the need for racial realism while fostering a sense of belonging for African-American students.

Colorblindness

Critical race scholars state that un-naming race consciously or unconsciously is the key

feature of colorblindness (Bell, 2019; Delgado, 2019). Bonilla-Silva (2006) described how beneath colorblindness lies the rhetorical maze of contemporary racial discourse that embodies a full-blown arsenal of arguments, phrases, and stories that are used to account for and ultimately justify racial inequities without naming race or invoking racism as a root cause of injustice. This ideology ignores the underrepresentation of people of color in prestigious jobs, schools, and elite institutional spaces that reify their marginalization (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Harris, 2000). Colorblindness leads to the assertion that U.S. citizens are living in a world where racial privilege no longer exists (Harris, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). It fails to acknowledge that systemic inequity and racialized education hierarchies still harm African Americans (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva. 2006; Delgado, 2019; Harris, 2000). An example of colorblindness can also be seen in the recent attacks on courses, content, and educators that teach about social injustice, race, and identity.

As scholarship moves forward, the terms "race evasive" and "color-evasive" are being used to attribute additional meaning to the concept of colorblindness (Annamma et al., 2017; Carter, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). Race-evasive refers to the intentional avoidance, suppression, and lack of acknowledgment of topics, content, and/or transformational practices surrounding race and racism (Annamma et al., 2017; Carter, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). The active suppression of practices and policies surrounding race, often in the guise of "neutrality" or "objectivity," serves to undermine discussion, reflection, and practice surrounding topics of race and racism. Race-neutral policies and practices only perpetuate and enable the same patterns of racial inequity (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2022). In the context of African-American education, the support of race and identity has been documented as a primary indicator of belonging for African-American students (Boston & Warren, 2017).

Challenging of Dominant Ideology

CRT seeks to challenge dominant ideologies. In the context of this study, dominant ideology refers to a set of problematic beliefs, values, and attitudes that are widely accepted by the larger society and result in the subordination of historically marginalized communities (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Harris, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). One example of dominant ideology includes race-neutral policies, practices (for example, curriculum), and rhetoric that fail to address issues of anti-Blackness that actively marginalize African-American students (Bell, 1992). This study aims to challenge the dominant ideology of deficient research about African-American students, schools, communities, and teachers. Additionally, it seeks to challenge the dominant ideology of anti-Blackness embedded within the larger American teaching force by documenting the strengths and unique forms of cultural capital that African-American teachers bring to the educational environment.

The use of strengths-based research while discussing African-American teachers and students challenges the dominant ideology of deficient, popular narratives surrounding communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn et al., 1999; Milner, 2008; Morrison, 2017; Yosso, 2005) This study aims to document the positive attributes and abilities of African-American teachers and students, countering the deficit-based research that has historically been used while speaking about the African-American community (Love, 2004).

This study also highlights the resistance, intellect, savviness, and resilience of African-American teachers as a practice for challenging dominant ideology, which has historically pushed or excluded African-American teachers and culture from the classroom. African-American teachers face multiple forms of structural and interpersonal marginalization, including unequal access to advancement and recognition, unequal pay, undervaluing of their

expertise and contributions to the education system, active push-out mechanisms resulting in underrepresentation, negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination from colleagues, administrators, and students (Irvine, 2003; Irvine, 2009; Irvine et al., 2011; Milner & Hoy, 2003). Yet they have demonstrated resilience, high levels of expertise, unique and necessary skillsets, and dedication to their profession and their students despite the institutional and interpersonal mechanisms that aim to marginalize, limit, or expel them from academia (Ladson-Billings, 2015; Milner & Hoy, 2003; Milner, 2006).

Counter Stories

One practice of challenging dominant ideology is the use of counter narratives, also known as counter stories. Counter narratives, which are stories that challenge stereotypes, reveal historical truths, contextualize the decision-making processes of marginalized people, normalize perspectives and perceptions, and highlight people's efforts to survive and excel despite challenges, have emerged as powerful sources of data to amplify the voices of marginalized communities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2018; Howard, 2008; Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019; Love, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). According to Howard (2008), counter storytelling highlights the agency of African-American folks by offering narratives that can "counter much of the rhetorical accounts of their identities that frequently describe them as culturally and socially deficient, uneducated, unmotivated, prone to violence, and anti-intellectual" (975). In research on education, experiences of institutional racism, alongside practices of resistance, are captured in counter narratives that are often voiced by students of color. This study is also a counter story to the dominance of deficit-centered research, focusing on the tools, strategies, and practices that are successful in fostering a sense of belonging for

African-American students and teachers (Irvine, 2009; Ladson- Billings, 2006; Milner, 2008; Tillman, 2008). Additionally, to prevent inequitable practices in K–12 schools, an important next step is to name and address systems of inequity through teaching and teacher education (Bell, 1992; Chapman, 2007; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixon & Parker, 2023; Delgado, 1989; Love, 2004; Stovall, 2006). This study also examines how counter stories are employed by educators and the impact this may have on African-American student belonging.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, theorized through CRT by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), acknowledges the many interlocking identities within the African-American experience. It refers to additional intersecting layers of racialized subordination based on gender, class, ethnicity, immigration status, surname, phenotype, language variation, disability, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Yosso, 2005). It acknowledges how additional layers of subordination that function in conjunction with race continually shape student experiences and uniquely impact African-American women and women of color (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) posited that there are three forms of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality entails the ways in which varying forms of structural inequity interlock and marginalize women of color, particularly African-American women. It highlights the unique forms of experiential knowledge that African-American women and women of color maintain due to their experiences of navigating compounding forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). The experiences of African-American women and women of color are often not accounted for within the structures of U.S. society, such as the U.S. legal system and community resources (Harris & Patton, 2019). Crenshaw

(1991) offered examples that demonstrate the unique ways that women of color experience marginalization, including marginalization within institutions that are intended to serve women. Political intersectionality pertains to how women of color are marginalized by policies, political agendas, and political interests from at least two subordinated groups whose political agendas sometimes come into conflict (Crenshaw, 1991; Harris & Patton, 2019). According to Crenshaw (1991), policies intended to increase equity for women have actually decreased equity for non-white women. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) identified how feminist efforts to politicize the experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize the experiences of people of color often proceed as individual movements. Yet each movement contributed to the further marginalization of women of color, particularly African-American women. Representational intersectionality delves into how portrayals of women can further obscure their own authentic lived experiences; this includes sexist and racist representations of women of color. It highlights the importance of having critical, complex, and empowering representation in media and contemporary settings (Crenshaw, 1991). Nuanced and multifaceted strategies that acknowledge the many dimensions of identity are needed to understand how to foster a sense of belonging for African-American students.

Experiential Knowledge

CRT centers on and values the experiences and knowledge surrounding the experiences of marginalization of communities of color (Bell et al., 1989; Hartlep, 2009; Yosso, 2005). This framework recognizes that the experiential knowledge of educators of color is critical, legitimate, and appropriate to understanding, learning, analyzing, and teaching about racial

subordination (Bernal Villapando., 2002). Experiential knowledge includes both cultural capital and cultural intuition gained through racialized experiences that provide unique insight into how to positively support students' racial identity while attempting to buffer against institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Yosso, 2005). Leveraging the experiential knowledge of African American students, this includes learning about students' experiences surrounding race and identity (both in school and outside of school), provide additional nuances and specificity in how to support the educational experiences and ultimately belonging for African American students (Chapman, 2005; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). This study explores both teachers' and students' experiential knowledge surrounding race, racism, and identity and how that knowledge impacts belonging for African-American students. An additional purpose of this study is to identify culturally responsive teaching practices, rooted in experiential knowledge and African-American social justice scholarship, which can be utilized by all educators who support African-American students.

Critical Race Theory as a Lens to Identify Structural, Institutional, Social, and Political Inequities Within the School

A CRT lens can help identify structural, institutional, social, and political factors that marginalize African-American students (Ladson- Billings, 1998; Milner, 2013; Tate, 1997). Institutional, structural, contextual, and political factors are distinguished *and* differentiated from common interpersonal understandings of belonging, which examine explicit attitudes, racial bias, or interpersonal interaction between individuals (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011).

Structural, institutional, social, and political factors are macro-level mechanisms that operate independently of the intentions and actions of individuals. Structural inequity refers to

the systemic and/or historical forms of discrimination that are built into the social, economic, and political structures of society (for example, Eurocentric curriculum in schools) and result in unequal access to resources, opportunities, or humane treatment based on political factors that include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, disability, and religion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Dixson et al., 2006). Structural inequity is intersectional in that these varying systems can work in tandem to marginalize African-American students', particularly African-American women's, educational outcomes (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Chapman & Gunby (2018) identified how race and class impacted African-American student experiences through de facto segregation and unequal funding for African-American students in charter schools and the "school choice" movement. De facto segregation, born and sustained through laws and policies that originated with de jure segregation, is the institutional component, while unequal funding outcomes, where charter schools fail to "do more with less" represent a structural component of racism. Chapman & Gunby (2018) found that African-American students in charter schools experience comparable levels of segregation to those in traditional public schools (TPS) but with fewer resources and similar or worse academic outcomes. According to Chapman & Gunby (2018), this demonstrates a return to unequal schooling and access to resources and reveals the enduring connections between race, law, policy, and education for African-American students.

Institutional inequity refers to laws, policies, rules, dominant social norms, and system-wide practices that impact African-American student experiences by limiting or preventing their sense of belonging in schools (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2000). The institutional context is not to be confused with the political context, which examines the social context that results in the creation of policy, laws, and norms. A CRT lens

shows the relationships between various historical institutional contexts and their influences on the lives of racially and socially marginalized individuals (Brayboy, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; Gordon, 1999; Yosso, 2005). One example can be seen in the passing of Proposition 209, the Affirmative Action Initiative, in California in 1996. Following the passing of Proposition 209, race-neutral admissions policies resulted in a "cascading effect" in the University of California system, where underrepresented African-American and Latinx students were more likely to be denied access to the most selective campuses (Comeaux & Allen, 2009; Comeaux et al., 2020). Race-neutral policies are examples of larger, inequitable political and racial projects (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Institutional racism designs and maintains racial hierarchies or structures of domination that are reproduced through intentional racial projects such as segregation, language, and immigration laws as well as seemingly race-neutral and "objective" policies such as state abortion laws that disproportionately affect African-American women. Regardless of their overt or covert intentions, these laws and policies serve to perpetuate patterns of power, privilege, and racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). A CRT lens helps identify how institutional racism that proliferates through political and social pathways, such as the previously mentioned school discipline policies, marginalizes African-American students through policy, norms, rules, and laws.

Critical race theorists use research to identify how African-American students' social and political contexts (both historical and present) impact their experiences (Harris, 1993a; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano et al., 2000). The social context refers to, but is not limited to, a wide range of factors across the social landscape, including cultural norms, social structures, institutions, historical events, economic conditions, political systems, and the physical environment, which frequently reinforce patterns of power (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1293; Solorzano

& Yosso, 2001). The political context in this study refers to how these broader social, economic, cultural, and historical factors shape policy that directly impacts marginalized communities, particularly African-American women and women of color (Crenshaw, 1991). CRT qualitative methodologies analyze various contextual settings to deconstruct their meanings and impact on experiences surrounding race and racism (Bell, 1992; Chapman, 2007; Crenshaw et al., 1995; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018; Parker, 2015).

CRT expanded the scope of traditional legal scholarship, which primarily centered, explored, and provided recommendations about policy with universal applications, to include scholarship with policies (and practices) that responded to the unique social and political context that students were situated within (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, 2019). For example, Stovall (2005) used a CRT lens to explore the experiences and impact of a community-based program that supported the academic achievement of African-American youth. Stovall (2005) identified how the larger political context, particularly the political interests of the larger city and school district, created barriers to supporting African-American student success. As mentioned earlier, RIT research identifies racial centrality, which is the impact of race on self-concept, as a primary indicator of African-American student belonging. (Boston & Warren, 2017). This program included parental and community involvement, a culturally relevant curriculum, and social justice training for coordinators, all of which supported the positive development of racial centrality and academic success. While examining the impact of the political context and the ways in which it negates African-American belonging, the school district in Stovall's (2005) study created a policy requiring "15 qualities" that each public school should incorporate in its daily operation to receive funding. None of the "qualities" stated in the funding policy centered on the development of a positive racial identity or

education around equity, which are both needed to support African-American belonging. The program did achieve success with African-American students; however, race-neutral (and race-evasive) funding policies created barriers that impacted the ability to facilitate belonging and access long-term funds to sustain the program (Stovall, 20015). Stovall (2005) presented a complicated and accurate picture of the social and political barriers that educators face in attempting to sustain and support the racial identity and, ultimately, belonging of African-American students by including the larger context of the program and the challenges the administration encountered to maintain it.

The historical connection between structural marginalization and African-American schooling is best summarized by Lynn et al. (1999) in the statement that the ominous question that has been and continues to lurk in the recesses of our minds is "At what point will our children have access to quality education?" and, additionally, "To what degree will schooling serve African-American students if it teaches them to respect and honor the cultures of others and not their own?" Lynn et al. (1999) questioned the structures of public education that prohibit African-American students from obtaining quality education and the content and pedagogies that steer children to value whiteness and be complicit in the preservation of white privilege. The exploration of these questions, such as Lynn's, was first pioneered by African-American scholars such as Carter G. Woodson (1933); almost 100 years later, the continuity and relevance of these questions remind us of the embedded presence of institutional and systemic racism in African-American schooling.

Review of the Research on Belonging

This thematic review primarily focuses on research after 1990. "Belonging," as both a

specific term and a framework to understand African-American student experiences, begins to emerge prominently in the early 1990s. Research cited in the review that was conducted before 1990s is research that impact contemporary understandings of belonging and African American student experiences.

In conducting the retrieval and selection of literature, the search terms "school belonging" and "sense of belonging" generated 840 results in ERIC. To be selected for analysis, a study needed to meet the following criteria: First, the researchers had to discuss African-American participants' and/or students' experiences. Second, the participants or the subjects must be in school, between preschool and grade 12. Third, articles needed to center belonging, or a sense of belonging, as a primary theme or concept. Fourth, publications needed to be about student experiences in the U.S. These search terms and inclusion criteria were also triangulated with Google Scholar, which provided the same articles pertaining to African-American students and belonging.

The four research questions guiding this study were used to organize the discussion of the literature: 1) What does a sense of belonging look like for African-American students? 2) How does race factor into belonging for African-American students? 3) How do African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging for African-American students? 4) How does racial identity influence the pedagogy of African-American teachers? A CRT analysis of the literature will follow this thematic review to explore the gap in research documenting the intersections between the social, historical, institutional, cultural, and/or political intersections of African American belonging.

What does a sense of belonging look like for African-American students?

Generally speaking, there was very little research that focused on African-American high-school students' experiences surrounding belonging (Booker, 2006). Belonging as an educational framework did not become popular until the 1990s following Goodenow's (1993a) seminal publication, which popularized the term, its definition, and its contemporary use in the field of education. To understand how belonging has been framed historically for African-American students prior to Goodenow's (1993a), I examined similar terminology that emerged prior to 1993 (such as attachment, connectedness, and social bonds) but still aligned with or held a connection to Goodenow's (1993a) definition.

Historically, African-American student belonging has often been framed through a deficient or socially deprived lens (Anderson et. al. 1974; Coleman et al. 1966, Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993b; Hirschi, 1969; Katz, 1964). On examining historical literature that used specific belonging terminology that aligned with Goodenow's (1993a) definition of belonging and centered African-American students, it appears that African-American students are framed as having negative levels of belonging in comparison to their white counterparts (Anderson et. al. 1974; Coleman et al. 1966, Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993b; Hirschi, 1969; Katz, 1964). They are historically identified as having a lower sense of belonging due to discrimination, racial socialization, neighborhood inequity, and many other factors (Coleman et al. 1966; Katz, 1964).

One primary example is identified in Goodenow and Grady (1993). The researchers used the psychological sense of school membership scale (PSSM)] to quantitatively measure belonging for a substantial number of African-American participants in their study. In School A, a research site in Goodenow's (1993b) study, the largest group of students identified themselves as African-American or Black (n = 89; 45%). According to their findings, most students

expressed relatively weak beliefs that they "belonged" in their schools, that teachers and schoolmates respected and valued them, that their friends valued school success, and that it was worth being in school. Although the sample was primarily students of color, with one-third being African Americans who reported low levels of belonging, racial bias, white supremacy, and intersectional systemic racism were not factored into the findings. When speaking of African-American students, the only potential connection made as to why African-American students reported not feeling a sense of belonging was by Fordham (1988), who argued that valuing schooling ran into conflict with African-American student identity—a long-disproved stereotype about the African-American community. A large body of research demonstrates that the African-American community does, in fact, have a long history of valuing education and regarding it as one of the few pathways to success (Booker, 2006; Franklin, 2002).

The PSSM and Goodenow's (1993a) definition of belonging have been the most frequently used instruments in recent years to measure student belonging (St-Armand, 2017). Goodenow's research is informative and has contributed significantly to the research on belonging; however, it fails to consider how structural racism, particularly the historical and contemporary aspects of embedded white supremacy ideology and culture, impacts how belonging looks for African Americans. This is reflective of the larger body of literature that often fails to name the specific role that white supremacy and its structural manifestations of racism have played in students' success or failure while discussing negative outcomes (Anderson et. al. 1974; Coleman et al. 1966, Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993b; Hirsch, 1970; Katz, 1964).

In contrast to the previous research cited, Boston and Warren (2017) found significant correlations between racial identity, school belonging, and academic achievement for African

Americans. Boston and Warren's (2017) investigation utilized a quantitative methodology to collect and analyze three forms of data. A survey comprised 41 items and included three sections: demographic information (self-reported grades), racial identity, and sense of belonging. The three components of racial identity, which are centrality, private regard, and public regard, were measured using the multidimensional model of African-American identity (Sellars et al., 1998). Students' sense of belonging was measured by the score of *connectedness* on the California Healthy Kids Survey Module (WestEd, 2008). The Boston and Warren (2017) sample drew from students in grades 10–12 who attended an anonymous urban public high school in Southern California ($N = 216$). Only African-American survey data was included in this study. The participants included 48 female and 57 male African-American high school students ($N = 105$). Boston and Warren's (2017) findings show that the centrality of race across content and school culture was the strongest predictor of cultivating school belongingness for African-American students. This finding is significant in that Boston & Warren is one of the first and only scholars, to document the importance of centralizing race in supporting belongingness for African-American students. Being quantitative, this study does not examine *how* school practices, policies, and teaching pedagogy factor into centrality, the primary indicator of belonging.

As mentioned earlier, the literature discussing African-American students and belonging is limited, often centers on deficits, and has failed to capture the many nuances of the African-American experience. Boston and Warren's (2017) research presents an example of what high levels of belonging can look like for African-American students. It complicates the colorblind monocultural assumptions embedded within Goodenow's (1993) definition of belonging. Cultivation and support of positive levels of racial centrality, rather than general acceptance,

appear to be a more stable predictor of belonging for African-American students. According to Boston and Warren (2017), “Feeling connected to a group through membership may make some African Americans resilient when faced with discrimination while others may feel vulnerable when faced with negative racial stereotypes” (p.3). Boston and Warren’s (2017) findings do not indicate that Goodenow’s definition of belonging cannot be used to support African-American students’ belonging in some capacity; however, they do dispel the universal assumptions of how belonging is defined, experienced, and cultivated across varying ethno-racial communities.

Boston and Warren (2017) bring a different vantage point to understanding how belonging is experienced by African-American students. As the research begins to open the door to cultural nuances and differences in belonging for African-American students, it also opens the door to questioning the use of the word “belonging” itself in a non-critical manner when referring to the experiences of African-American students or students from marginalized communities at large. When referring to African-American student experiences, the term “belonging” holds unique historical connections to African-American enslavement and integration under the false belief that African Americans needed to literally be in the presence of whiteness to experience a limited form of humanity, dignity, intelligence, or success (Coleman, 1966). Boston and Warren’s (2017) research, along with a large body of prior research (spanning almost 100 years) by equity-minded African-American scholars, emphasizes the need to center positive racial identity development (often through systemic and interpersonal reform) and strengths-based practices to support African-American students’ educational experiences, this remains true for belonging (Bell, 2019; Banks, 1993; Boston & Warren, 2017; Carter, 2005; Carter, 2007; Clark & Clark, 1950; Foster, 1993a; Gay, 1988; Hundley, 1965; Hilliard, 1980; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Preston, 1940; Sizemore,

1973; Turner & McGann, 1980; Woodson, 1935/2017).

How does race factor into belonging for African-American students?

A large portion of the relevant literature conceptualizes race quantitatively through a colorblind lens, where nuances surrounding the institutional context of race are not identified. It was not until the 1990s that research began to broach the concepts of race and its intersections with belonging (Peguero et al., 2016). Studies that did examine race and belonging failed to name the specific role that white supremacy and structural manifestations of racism, more specifically anti-Blackness, have played in African-American students' success or failure while discussing student outcomes (Katz, 1964; Coleman 1966, Hirschi, 1969; Anderson et. al. 1974; Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993a; Gutman & Midgely, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008). African-American student experiences are often framed as having deficient levels of belonging without situating the challenges or school experiences within a larger context of social inequity. Quantitative research is often given credibility when it is conducted "independent" of context and free of social or cultural values (Crowe & Sheppard, 2010). However, social context cannot be removed from research, as it often shapes the values, beliefs, behaviors, and outcomes of individuals and groups that are being studied. Additionally, situating the experiences of marginalized communities within a larger context of systemic inequity is essential, as African-American students and families are frequently blamed for their lack of belonging or the various forms of marginalization that they encounter (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Finn, 1989; Goodenow 1993b).

The racial narrative surrounding African-American students and belonging is that African-American students who lack belonging need help as opposed to schools needing help

creating a sense of belonging for African-American students. For example, Goodenow and Grady's (1993) seminal study, which included a substantial number of African-American students, found weak belonging (as measured by the PSSM) and achievement for African-American students. Goodenow and Grady (1993) found that despite positive scores on measures of academic motivation, African-American students expressed relatively weak beliefs that they "belonged" in their schools, that their teachers and schoolmates respected and valued them, and that it was worth being in school. Belonging was measured through a quantitative survey that did not center on or explore institutional or interpersonal racism.

Hundley (1965) and Boston and Warren (2017) were the only two articles I found that contained empirical research that documented the relationship between race and belonging, specifically for African-American students. Both studies documented the centralizing of race and resilience against racism as primary factors for supporting African-American belonging. Although Goodenow and Grady (1993) posited that there may be cultural differences impacting student belonging, their work contained no in-depth discussion on strategies and practices to support the racial identities of African-American students and students of color. Although Boston and Warren (2017) is among the first to identify the importance of race in creating and understanding a sense of belonging for African-American students, this framework still lacks critical discussion about the role of institutional racism in shaping African-American student experiences. Furthermore, because the study is quantitative, it lacks a discussion of applicable strategies to explain *how* to create belonging for African-American students by centralizing race. A sense of critical belonging is useful for future research looking to document the connection between systemic inequity and African-American belonging.

How do African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging for African-American

students?

There is a longstanding, established body of research demonstrating that African-American teachers positively contribute to the social and emotional development of their African-American students (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1997, 1991; Gay, 1988; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). One example of this research includes the development of identity through critical consciousness, which serves to foster emotional healing, self-efficacy, and improved student outcomes for African-American students (Irvine, 1989; King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn et al., 1999; Milner & Hoy, 2003). Foster (1997) demonstrated that social justice-oriented African-American teachers encourage all their students to aspire for excellence. Other scholars have documented that African-American teachers demonstrate higher expectations of African-American students and resist deprivation theories while supporting them (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Comeaux et al., 2022; Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1993a; Gershenson et al., 2016; Irvine, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn et al., 1999). African-American students taught by African-American teachers are more likely to report a desire to attend college and state that their teachers care for and motivate them (Egalite & Kisida, 2018).

Historically, African-American teachers have demonstrated a commitment to social justice, which includes the centering and support of racial identity (Dubois, 1935; Foster, 1996; Hundley, 1965; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lynn et al., 1999; Milner, 2020). As noted earlier, Hundley (1965) documented strong graduation rates, college-going rates, class attendance rates, and low tardiness at Dunbar High, a low-income homogenous African-American school before integration. Hundley (1965) found that, after high school, many Dunbar graduates attended Ivy League institutions. Hundley (1965) also found that African-American teachers and administrators in these schools were well-trained, created their own culture of teaching, and

engaged students in curricular and extracurricular activities that reinforced the values of the school and community. There was also evidence of strong teacher–parent relationships, parental support for school, and positive parental attitudes about the value of school. Finally, school leadership implemented the shared vision that parents and teachers held about battling systemic inequity. According to Hundley (1965), African-American schools shared one main goal: to uplift and support students in the face of white supremacy. Immediately following the removal of African-American teachers during integration, Dunbar's performance declined, with African-American students achieving less than 20% proficiency in basic courses (Sowell, 2016).

Equity-minded African-American teachers offer a primary unique skill while fostering belonging for African-American students: cultural understanding—or critical experiential knowledge which fosters capacity to design and model culturally responsiveness within course content and student support (Hundley, 1965; Irvine, 1989; Irvine, 2002; King, 1994; Mitchell, 1998). The definition of culturally responsive teaching as outlined by Tintiango-Cubales et al. (2015) consists of the same three tenets of CRP that frame this study. Culturally responsive teaching, as also discussed in CRP, includes the following: the use of cultural competence to understand how to use student experiences as starting points, critical consciousness to understand structural forms of domination, and high levels of expectations and care to foster academic success. There is ample research showing that these three pillars support the academic success of African-American students as well as students of all racial groups (Barnes, 2006; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings 1990, 1995).

Through the application of CRP, African-American teachers remain committed to academic achievement while promoting students' resilience and motivation (Mitchell, 1998). In the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, comprising 16,810 student–teacher dyads,

researchers found that African-American teachers held higher expectations of their African-American students compared to white teachers (Gershenson et al., 2016). Due to the many culturally responsive reasons listed, compared to African-American students taught by white teachers, African-American students taught by African-American teachers are more likely to report a desire to attend college and state that their teachers care for and motivate them (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Comeaux et al., 2020; Dixson, 2003; Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Foster, 1993a; Gershenson et al., 2016; Irvine, 2009; Lynn et al., 1999). As a related mechanism, implicit biases influence teachers' perceptions of "negative" student behavior, which ultimately accounts for the higher levels of exclusionary discipline experienced by African-American students (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; England & Meier, 1985). Administrative data collected from a 2007–08 North Carolina sample of elementary-, middle-, and high-school students revealed that African-American students taught by African-American teachers had fewer office referrals for misconduct compared to African-American students taught by white teachers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Ultimately, high-quality African-American instruction demonstrates a historical connection to social justice, multicultural awareness, culturally responsive pedagogy, high expectations, and equitable responses to student behavior. Equity-minded African-American teachers' drive for racial equity within education stems from an understanding that education can be used as a tool to transform the minds and lives of African-American students (Decuir-Gunby, 2009; Dixon-Roman, 2014; Foster, 1993b; Foster, 1997). These practices are only some of the historical examples that demonstrate how African-American teachers have fostered welcoming learning environments for African-American students. As mentioned earlier, there were a limited number of references that specifically centered on belonging terminology,

African-American teachers, and African-American students.

How does racial identity influence the pedagogy of African-American teachers?

The lived experiences of equity-minded African-American teachers inform the pedagogy used in the classroom; these lived experiences intersect with larger societal issues of power, which include race and identity. Intersectional experiences of race and identity for African-American teachers provide cultural awareness and highlight nuances in supporting African-American students' belonging and success (King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Booker, 2006; Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). There is a longstanding, established body of research demonstrating that the racial identity of African-American teachers positively contributes to the academic, social, and emotional development of their African-American students (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Chapman, 2007; Decuir-Gunby, 2007; Foster, 1997; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn et al., 1999).

African-American teachers offer a primary unique skill for African-American students: cultural understanding—or their capacity to design content that is culturally responsive and where teachers serve as role models (Irvine, 1989; Irvine, 2003; King, 1993). Research has demonstrated that African-American teachers' sense of commitment to African-American youth is fueled by a keen understanding of the marginalized context in which these students are both being educated and will navigate the world outside the school (Lynn et al., 1999). This results in a sense of urgency, stemming from personal experiences of injustice, which compels these educators to view education as a tool for transforming not only the minds but also the lives of African-American children (Decuir-Gunby, 2009; Dixon-Roman, 2014; Foster, 1995; Lynn et al., 1999). Non-African-American teachers may lack the experiential and cultural knowledge

necessary to understand the unique and complex cultural nuances associated with supporting African-American students' belonging (Booker, 2006; Dee, 2004; Dubois, 1935; Delpit et al., 1988; Ferguson, 1998; Ford & Harris, 1996; Irvine, 2002;). Cherng and Halpin (2016) demonstrated that African-American teachers' experiential knowledge surrounding issues of race, identity, and African-American culture supports a "multicultural awareness" that is core to creating culturally responsive classroom environments that foster belonging for African-American students.

The impact of African-American racial identity on African-American learning environments is often demonstrated through a commitment to social justice, which stems from African-American teachers' personal experiences and knowledge of inequity. Seminal research by Hundley (1965) demonstrated how African-American teachers, principals, students, and families at Dunbar worked together to battle institutional racism and support student success. Looking at empirical research on how experiences surrounding racial inequity have historically impacted African-American teaching practices and learning environments at large, Hundley's (1965) research was situated within a segregated African-American school and education was viewed by the African-American community as one of the few paths that African-American students had to gain increased access to resources and experience (within a larger marginalized context) as well as dignity within the community. The teachers, leadership, and administrators at Dunbar were all situated within a Jim Crowe context and understood the personal impact of systemic anti-Blackness and the challenges to African-American students outside the institution. For this reason, historically, African-American teachers and the African-American learning environment at large (for example, historically black colleges and universities) have demonstrated a commitment to social justice and have provided educational opportunities to

African-American students when they were or even still are relatively nonexistent for African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Jean-Marie, 2006; Mobley, 2017). This commitment to social justice often stems from the intersectional racial experiences surrounding racial inequity that African Americans have endured (Hundley, 1965; Ladson-Billing, 1994; Lynn et al., 1999).

A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the Findings

A critical race analysis of the literature can identify how CRT concepts may help support or negate belonging for African-American students according to prior research. Although there have been several articulations of the theory (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997), several key concepts emerged from empirical research that aligned with Boston and Warren's (2017) indicator for African-American belonging (i.e., racial centrality). As mentioned earlier, Boston and Warren's (2017) 77 seminal quantitative research identifies what indicators support African-American belonging, with racial centrality being the primary indicator. This study expands on Boston and Warren's (2017) valuable contributions by including a CRT analysis of the challenges, systems of support, counter stories, and barriers associated with building a sense of belonging in African-American students. CRT concepts include racial realism, challenging of the dominant ideology, experiential knowledge, the embeddedness of race and intersectional racism, and colorblindness or race-evasiveness.

Racial Realism

Racial realism remains the apex of discourses focused on curricular equity (Chapman & Gunby, 2018). A core concept driving this study is the development of proactive strategies

surrounding anti-Blackness and racial inequity in schools. In the context of African-American education and the creation of a sense of critical belonging, racial realism is the acknowledgment of systemic racism (and intersecting social inequities) as a systematic set of policies, cultural norms, assumptions, theories, and legally sanctioned institutionalized practices deeply and historically embedded in American polity that marginalize the experiences of African-American students (Chapman & Bophal, 2018; Mills, 1998). It is both acknowledging the marginalization of people of color and using that knowledge to "imagine and implement strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (Chapman & Gunby, 2018; Bell, 1992, p. 363). According to Bell (1992), "That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (p.374). Due to the historical and current suppression of African-American voices in schools, such as the inequitable representation in curriculum, lack of African-American teacher representation, and lack of equitable funding, institutional transformation resulting in the support of African-American racial centrality supports positive African-American experiences and outcomes.

The connection between the support of African-American racial identity, schooling, and success of African-American students has long been documented (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012; Delpit, 2003; Dubois, 1935; Foster, 1993a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). However, the concept of racial realism is relatively new within the field of research on belonging. Boston and Warren (2017) was among the first to reveal the centrality of race and racism as the primary indicators of belonging for African-American students. Few studies have found negative associations between the support of racial identity and academic achievement (Boston & Warren, 2017; Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Worrell, 2007). Ultimately, when teachers and administrators acknowledge the necessity of and proactively aid the development of

practices to address anti-Blackness and support African-American identity, belonging and, ultimately, academic success are fostered (Boston & Warren, 2017; Hundley, 1965; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Racial realism is often misunderstood as lacking the understanding of hope and transformation; however, racial realism is concerned with the acknowledgment of racial inequity so that proactive practices and policies can be implemented to achieve moments of resilience, hope, joy, and transformation (even if temporarily). According to Chapman & Gunby (2018), the discourses around schooling and racial realism center on the educational needs of students of color as racially marginalized subjects and, therefore, generates education reforms to increase racial equity in schools and classrooms. Racial realism at the institutional level implies the creation of proactive policies, such as teacher training and content within the curriculum, that support the racial identity and perceptions of African-American students. At the interpersonal level, racial realism offers a choice to all communities to support belonging for African-American students by acknowledging and resisting inequitable institutional practices that marginalize African-American students and students from communities of color at large or to be complicit in the implementation of race-neutral strategies and policies that have been shown to be ineffective and problematic in supporting the academic experiences of African-American students (Bell, 1992).

Challenging of the Dominant Ideology and Countering Deficit Ideologies of African-American Students

The literature often conceptualizes race through a deficit binary or a colorblind lens. While referring to racial binaries, African-American students and their experiences are

primarily framed deficiently in comparison with their white counterparts (Booker, 2006). Not discussing or centering African-American strengths alongside the challenges while mainly valorizing whiteness is problematic in understanding belonging for African-American students because their experience is limited to denigration and deficiency (Reay, 2008). These binaries create a self-enhancing dominant ideology about dominant groups, where the construction of a deficient racialized or ethnic "other" reaffirms beliefs about the superiority of whiteness and dominant cultural norms. Deficit binaries can be seen in the literature while looking at terms and phrases describing African-American students in comparison with white students. For example, African-American students are often regarded as not "intelligent" and not "motivated," not "valuing" education; and are often considered to have weak social bonds and weak student connectedness (Katz, 1964; Coleman et al. 1966, Hirschi, 1969; Anderson et. al. 1974; Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993a). This deficit narrative is continually reproduced because it is often seen as empathetic and understanding or an investment in equitable conditions (Reay, 2008). The academic superiority of white students is commonly situated within a "neutral" or cultural colorblind lens, where mainly white researchers fail to mention how the institution of race impacts, oppresses, and affords privileges to various racial groups and amplifies their academic outcomes (Reay, 2008). Davis & Museus (2019) posit that dominant communities within academia have a long history of researching marginal groups as if they are deficient external objects that serve to reaffirm hegemonic systems of oppression. The purpose of this dissertation is to challenge the saturation of deficit narratives about African-American communities in academia through the production of strengths-based research.

Hundley (1965) was an African-American scholar who was among the first to document the value that African-American educational spaces offer African-American students prior to

the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Hundley (1965) found that African-American students not only experience high levels of belonging and achievement but that they did so amid adverse conditions. Although the lack of financial resources was a primary obstacle to achieving positive outcomes, Hudley's findings proved that neither the lack of resources nor a lack of financial stability in the home equated to a deficient student experience. Her findings demonstrate that African-American communities can create their own equitable, high-performing spaces of belonging without the presence of white teachers or students. Hundley countered the findings of the Coleman (1966) report and other popular reports at that time, such as the Moynihan Report, that sought to explain the failures of integration through a deficient depiction of Black families (Geary, 2015). Her study is one of the earliest to provide evidence that African-American students, communities, teachers, and families do value education and can experience success even within the confines of white supremacy.

Counter Narratives

Counter narratives create spaces of resilience that buffer against anti-African-American messaging and practices. One of the primary functions of a counter narrative in CRT scholarship is to counteract problematic, distorted, and/or inaccurate narratives about marginalized communities (Delgado, 1989; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Milner & Howard, 2013). Howard (2008) explored the educational experiences of African-American men in science, disrupting the saturated, stereotypical, and socially deprived narratives that are often highlighted in research and media. Some examples of African-American male stereotypes reified through deficit research include, but are not limited to, not valuing education, being underemployed, not being present in the family, being criminal-minded, being hypersexual, and

being pathological in nature (Wade, 1994; Davis, 1994; Gordon, 1996, 1997; Price, 2000). Howard's (2008) counter narrative amplified the stories and voices of academically successful African-American males while also identifying how microaggressions, race, and racism impacted their educational experiences as they successfully transitioned to four-year colleges. This research helped reveal specific examples of African-American marginalization and provide recommendations to educators and the research community at large about how to support African-American men in education.

Counter narratives can also be used to reframe and, thus, resist historically deficient narratives about African-American students. DeCuir and Dixson (2004), Love (2004), and Ladson-Billings (2006) provided a counter narrative surrounding the "achievement gap" and African-American student success. The researchers reframed the "achievement gap" as an educational debt, which shifted the focus from African-American children to the school system, which had failed to support African-American students. Love's (2004) research assists educators with various tools and frameworks that can assist educators in creating strengths-based understandings and environments while supporting African-American students. Finally, Milner and Howard (2013) demonstrated that cultural misalignment can exist in classrooms between teachers and students, and counter narratives may serve as a tool to build unity and engagement within the classroom (Carter, 2007; Gay 2010; Love, 2004; Milner, 2008; Martin, 2021; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This research challenges the dominant myth/narrative that CRT is divisive (Sawchuck, 2021). Counter narratives support rich academic engagement and critical thinking while providing models and tools that unify all students against inequitable structural practices, beliefs, and ideologies.

Experiential Knowledge

The lived experiences of African-American teachers involve intersections of power, race, and identity, which provide experiential knowledge about how to support belonging and student success for African-American students (Booker, 2006; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mitchell, 1998; Irvine, 1989; Irvine, 2002). Empirical research demonstrates that these lived experiences inform the ways in which African-American teachers express cultural solidarity and communicate with African-American students (Foster, 1991; Foster, 1993a; Foster 1995). Lynn et al. (1999) and Dixson (2003) documented how African-American educators used their own experiences while explaining how to navigate various challenges with students. This leveraging of experiential knowledge to facilitate learning allows African-American educators to build relationships with students by demonstrating a genuine and authentic understanding of their experiences (Dixson, 2003). Parker & Lynn (2002) highlighted how African-American experiential knowledge surrounding race and racism serves as a primary data source, comprising firsthand accounts that can inform the understanding of a topic. This knowledge can be communicated through storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and personal narratives (Delgado, 1989). Experiential knowledge equips African-American educators with the tools to recognize and support the historical, political, and economic realities of African-American students.

Experiential learning surrounding race and identity drives equity-minded African-American teachers, educators, and schools to create learning environments that nurture, affirm, and develop African-American youth as human beings with the capacity to change the world (Lynn et al., 1999). When attempting to gain a nuanced understanding of how to support African-American student belonging in school, research must begin by centering the experiential knowledge and experiences of African-American teachers who exhibit strong

critical consciousness (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Hooks, 1994; Jackson et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lynn et al., 1999) Centering the experiential knowledge of African-American social-justice educators is a simple practice that can be done by all researchers and practitioners to enhance understandings of African-American belonging.

> As marginalized people, we're the best authority on telling our own stories. It's great that more people are talking about how to write authentic, sensitive stories outside their experience, and getting sensitivity readers involved, but it's also important that marginalized people are able to tell their own stories (Adams & Walker-Barnes, 2022).

Embeddedness of Race and Intersectional Racism

The embeddedness of race and racism is central to a critical race analysis in education (Chapman, 2013; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018). The centricity of race and racism demonstrates how race is embedded in U.S. society and that racism intersects with various forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, and immigrant status (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw 1991). Boston and Warren's (2017) findings about African-American belonging and the importance of racial centrality are important because they highlight that racial centrality may act as a buffer against anti-African-American messaging and practices embedded in the larger society. Tatum argued that supporting African-American racial identity not only fosters higher academic outcomes but also boosts pride, readiness, and resilience against the marginalization embedded in the education system and larger social landscape. Chapman and Bhopal (2013) identified the continued embeddedness of intersectional racism through their exploration of issues of race, class, and gender in mixed-race schools in the U.S. and England. They found that young men and women of color experienced racism in similar and divergent

ways that were connected to stereotypes of Black bodies, patriarchy, economics, and Black masculinity. Their findings not only demonstrated the continued significance of racial inequity but also illuminated a nuanced set of experiences, recommendations, and challenges that were specific to the intersections of race, gender, and social-class inequalities in education.

Looking at the embeddedness of race and racism in the field of belonging itself, there is still a minimal amount of research on African-American belonging that is written by equity-minded African-American researchers and that includes African-American experiential knowledge (Booker, 2006). In this light, most of the literature on belonging I reviewed still made race-evasive cultural assumptions about the universal application of belongingness to all racial groups (Taylor et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Colorblindness/Race-Evasiveness

A large portion of the literature on belonging conceptualizes race through a universal colorblind lens and without cultural variation (Boston & Warren, 2017; Byrne, 2006; Skeggs, 2004; Reay, 2008). These universal assumptions about how belonging is experienced fail to consider and minimize how race, ethnicity, culture, and identity shape and differentiate student experiences. Colorblindness denies a primary component needed for African-American belonging, which is the support of African-American racial identity and acknowledgment of systemic inequity. As mentioned earlier, without historical contextualization of how institutional racism affects student outcomes, African-American students are solely left to blame for their own failures.

Race neutrality acts as a camouflage for dominant norms and policies that socially reproduce interests and power for racially privileged groups (for example whites in the United

States) (Bell, 1992; Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1989; López, 2003). Rousseau and Tate's (2003) study demonstrates race-evasive teacher pedagogy and its impact on students of color. Teachers in the study refused to believe there was a connection between racial inequity and the underachievement of students of color (Dixon & Rosseau, 2018). Not only did the teachers actively deny the impact of systemic racism on student outcomes, but they also attributed the differences in student achievement primarily to class. This race-neutral stance prevented the teachers from reflecting on their own practices and creating proactive strategies pertaining to race and identity that may have positively impacted student outcomes (Parker, 2015). A colorblind or race-evasive analysis often fails to prepare individuals to recognize the connections between the race of an individual and the real social inequity underlying their racial experiences (Gotanda, 1991, p. 7). As a result of the embeddedness of race and racism, race-neutral practices, policies, and laws often perpetuate racial and ethnic subordination by ignoring the real experiences of marginalization that communities of color, particularly African-American students, face (Bell, 1991; Parker, 2015). Gotanda (1991) argued that this "lack of connection to social realities places severe limitations on the possible remedies for injustice and thereby maintains a system of white privilege."

Unique Nuances Associated with Belonging for African-American Students

It is important to note that African-American students' belonging does not always correlate to student achievement (Brooms, 2019; Faircloth, & Hamm, 2005; Graham et al., 2022). While accounting for inconsistent correlations between student achievement and belonging, one must consider the fact that African Americans have historically been segregated in and expelled from Western educational spaces. Yet, there are still examples of African-

American student success. Systemic barriers such as segregation deny student belonging and have required students to maintain unwavering persistence when progressing through the academic pipeline. Voelkl (1997) found that African-American students who reported higher levels of belonging did not have higher levels of academic performance. This finding is supported by Booker (2006), who found no significant relationship between school belonging and academic achievement in a sample of 10th–12th-grade African-American students. Connell et al., (1994) found a moderate relationship between relatedness and academic achievement. Additionally, feeling connected to a group through membership may make some African Americans resilient when they are faced with discrimination, while others may feel vulnerable when they are confronted with negative racial stereotypes (Okeke et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2003).

Masters of the Deficient Anti-Black Schooling Stereotype

Three publications were cited multiple times throughout many of the pieces reviewed and significantly factored in the understanding of African-American students and belonging. These publications include The Coleman Report (1965), Maslow (1968), and Ogbu (1981).

The Coleman Report (1965)

The Margold Report (1930), funded by the NAACP, found differences in school funding prior to the 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision, where African-American segregated schools were documented as severely underfunded in comparison to white schools. Margold's (1930) findings were so alarming that he advised the National African American Council for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to "boldly challenge the constitutional validity" of

underfunded African-American schools as a violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. These findings were paired with the outcomes of Brown v. Board of Education , which found de jure segregation illegal (one of the reasons being unequal funding), and the recent passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mandated a report that described the state of unequal educational opportunities in elementary and secondary education across the U.S (Warren, 1954).

The Coleman Report (1965) was the first nationally funded education study funded by the Department of Education. Coleman's study was mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the findings were publicly reported to the President of the U.S. and Congress (Dickinson, 2016). Participants in the Coleman Report (1966) consisted of 600,000 surveyed children (from Grades 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12), 60,000 teachers, and roughly 4,000 schools. Regional demographics with high populations of non-white students were intentionally selected (Coleman et al., 1966). Coleman et al. (1966) analyzed the surveys developed by the Coleman et al. team, analyzing the differences between segregated African-American and white schools. A regression analysis was then conducted, and the results were viewed in conjunction with those from the state standardized test. Coleman et al. (1966) attributed the lower outcomes of African-American children in standardized tests in comparison to white children to a lack of value for education in African-American families and students and the lower educational attainment of the parents and caregivers in African-American families. Coleman et al. (1966) argued that school funding has little effect on student achievement and that African-American students can benefit from integrated classrooms where further exposure to white students and teachers would put them in better educational spaces. Although Coleman et al. (1966) did not use the exact term of "belonging," his study heavily shaped how future researchers conceptualize and measure

belonging while discussing African-American students and communities of color at large (Ainsworth, 2013).

The Coleman Report (1966) marks a significant instantiation of the mainstream stereotype that ascribes families of color, specifically African Americans, as having low educational aspirations. A lack of belonging is commonly attributed to the fault of the students and parents while speaking of African-American students' experiences. Coleman et al. (1966) argued that a lack of equal school funding did not impact student success and instead attributed the low standardized test scores of African-American students to cultural attitudes about education. This finding has been debunked by a large body of research that shows that African Americans have a long history of valuing education. The narrative propagated by the Coleman Report reproduced and strengthened the dominant ideology and myth that African-American communities, families, and students do not value education or have an "oppositional attitude" toward education. Coleman's (1966) findings did not acknowledge flagrant systemic racism or social inequity within segregated schooling and blamed lower test scores on African-American families and the culture at large. Consequently, Coleman recommended a one-way integration model where African-American students would be forced to integrate into white-dominant educational spaces, not vice versa or simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, Coleman's (1966) research was the first national education study conducted by the government on educational inequity. As a result, his findings formed the basis for how school integration was facilitated. Coleman's (1966) recommendations of one-way integration marked the beginning of the achievement gap and inequitable educational outcomes that are still felt today.

Scholars have worked for over half a century to counter Coleman's work and the research of the many scholars who followed his lead. According to Rice University (2013),

African Americans are the most likely of all ethnic groups to emphasize the importance of education. Valencia (2002) found that the same myth applied to Mexican-American families, arguing that the myth lies in the pseudoscientific notion of “deficit thinking that blames the victim, rather than holding oppressive and inequitable schooling arrangements culpable” (p.81). Coleman’ (1966) work is one of the most highly cited, more than 15 years after his death. The Coleman report remains controversial and is responsible for fundamentally shifting perceptions about African-American schools (Ainsworth, 2013). This deficit-centered ideology continues to haunt the narrative surrounding African-American schools and schools of color to this day.

Maslow’s (1968) Belonging Assertion

In a similar time period as Coleman, Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” (1968) became a standard reference for addressing the needs of poor children in academic spaces. In an enduring example of white privilege and ableism, Maslow refers to his research sample as “the master race of people.” This is because Maslow excluded people based on physical and mental ableism, arguing that “the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy.” Additionally, Maslow studied the “healthiest” 1% of the college student population, whose participants include Albert Einstein and Henry David Thoreau. Maslow based his theory partially on his own assumptions about human potential and partially on his case studies of historical figures whom he believed to have self-actualized. Maslow’s conceptual model posits that a specific set of antecedents must be present in a chronological or linear order for an individual to achieve belonging. Maslow’s pyramid is an assumed binary where it is assumed that if certain conditions are not met in a linear fashion, happiness, and self-actualization cannot occur. However, examples such as the

Dunbar School complicate these linear assumptions about development and report that, within a larger social landscape of inequity, African-American teachers cultivated positive student wellbeing in an environment where African-American students outperformed students from higher-funded segregated white schools, and African-American students went on to produce some of the most notable individuals in American history.

The discussion on Maslow and his relationship to research on belonging is not intended to dismiss the importance of resources in supporting student success; this has been supported for long. The purpose is to identify that strengths, dignity, happiness, and resilience can exist in communities that are deemed as "at risk," "low income," and marginalized. Examples of self-actualization that exist outside Maslow's linear progressions complicate and disrupt Maslow's assumptions about the linearity of self-actualization and stereotypes about the capabilities of low-income and marginalized communities. Maslow's pyramid is impactful in that it alludes to the importance of resources; however, it lacks nuance and multidimensionality in that it fails to acknowledge that happiness, dignity, and self-actualization can still occur within marginalized conditions. Maslow's pyramid sets the conceptual groundwork for deficit-centered reductive generalizations about low-income communities of color, a privileging of white middle-class norms, and the lack of strengths-based research that is documented while exploring marginalized and low-income communities of color. According to Maslow's logic and a common socially deprived narrative about African-American schools, African-American schools are deficient, unable to actualize, and ultimately inferior because they are underfunded. This reifies reductive stereotypes about African-American students and communities at large. While being underfunded causes multiple institutional barriers, it does not mean that moments of resilience cannot still occur simultaneously while the schools experience systemic inequities.

Although Maslow’s (1968) work is purely conceptual, not culturally nuanced, and not based on empirical research, it remains a popular and commonly used framework (Kremer & Hammond, 2013).

Ogbu (1981)

Ogbu (1981) borrowed from the dominant ideology underlying Coleman’s (1965) findings and popularized the socially deprived and deficient anti-Black schooling narrative. Ogbu’s (1981) research primarily attributed various forms of racial inequities to stereotypes that have been disproven by decades of research. Ogbu’s (1981) research contributed to an age-old dominant ideology that blames African Americans for their own marginalization. This ideology, which is reinforced by the findings of Coleman (1966) and others, often employs deficient terminology and characterizes African-American students as permanently deficient or socially deprived instead of working to address the system that marginalizes them.

According to Ogbu’s (1981) “Ghetto Theory of Success,” “Ghetto Blacks believe less in the sufficiency of schooling and tend to approve the use of other alternative ‘survival strategies’ like ‘hustling’ and ‘pimping’.” Ogbu also posited that African-American students held an oppositional attitude toward schooling and did not value education, which is a widely disproven stereotype. There is a large body of research documenting the high value that education holds within the African-American community (Dubois, 1935; Hundley, 1965; Harris, 2006; King, 1994; Love, 2004). In fact, a 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that 79% of Black parents with children under the age of 18 said that it is either extremely important that their children earn a college degree compared to 67% of white parents, which directly conflicts with Coleman (1966) and Ogbu’s (1981) findings. Ogbu (1981) made widely disproven

generalizations that stem from socially deprived narratives that reinforce and center African-American stereotypes. Moreover, this study reinforces that dominant ideology often aims to "fix" marginalized communities rather than "fixing," addressing, and disrupting the actual system of inequity that causes marginalization.

Ogbu's socially deprived narrative regarding low-income communities, and much socially deprived research at large holds parallels to Maslow's (1943, 1968) hierarchy of needs. In Maslow's model, self-actualization (love and happiness) cannot be achieved if prior levels of the pyramid, such as a "stable" family or access to resources, are not achieved. This connects to Ogbu (1981), who mentions that "The marginal economic status of the black male makes it difficult for many to participate in raising their children as husband-fathers in the family." This is a classic example of the absent African-American father ideology that has already been disproven. In this example, Ogbu uses deficit terminology such as "ghetto" to blame economically marginalized African-American communities for the lack of access to resources while assuming that being economically marginalized automatically translates to being an absent father. Maslow's (1943,1968) and Ogbu's (1966) research is also one-dimensional in that it fails to acknowledge the positive assets of a community or provide a counter-stereotypical example of folks who have achieved success and self-actualization in life in marginalized positions. Their research also fails to acknowledge that one can experience self-actualization while experiencing marginalization simultaneously.

Many of Ogbu's findings have been disproven and even deemed problematic; however, the ripple effect from the popularization of his research can be felt to this day (Akom, 2008; Harris, 2006; Harper, 2007). During my review of the literature, Ogbu emerged as one of the most cited scholars while referring to African-American education. His findings reify dominant

ideology via stereotypes, which continue to blame African Americans for their own marginalization. Not only does this research contribute to the overrepresentation of deficit-centered research about African Americans, but it also fails to provide effective strategies and strengths that could enhance the educational experiences of African Americans. Ogbu's (1981) approach fails to document a complex, nuanced, and multidimensional portrait of African-American education. Ogbu's research serves as a reminder of the importance of including strengths-based research alongside critical consciousness while seeking to support the educational experiences of historically marginalized communities.

Conclusion

My four research questions guiding this review of literature (and the study at large) examine the connection between African-American student and teacher experiences, racial identity, and belonging. The first two questions examine if and how race factors into a sense of belonging for African-American students and what belonging has historically looked like for this student group. The last two questions examine how African-American teachers have historically fostered belonging, particularly for African-American students, and the influence of their own intersectional racial identity on their teaching approach. In exploring this concept, I employed scholarship from RIT, CRP, and CRT to explore the relationship between belonging and African-American schooling at the individual, instructional, and institutional levels. In this exploration of literature aligned with the research questions, I highlight positive examples of how belonging has been used to support African-American students. I also, however, referenced notable works that perpetuate problematic dominant ideologies, myths, and deficient narratives that actively undermine belonging for African-American students to this day.

RIT helps address the first two research questions, which examine if and how race factors into a sense of belonging for African-American students and what belonging has historically looked like for African-American students. RIT identifies racial centrality as the primary indicator of fostering belonging for African-American students (Boston & Warren, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). These seminal findings from Boston and Warren (2017), guided by RIT frameworks and methodology developed by Sellers et al. (1998), identify cultural nuances in belonging for African-American students and challenge monocultural and/or race-neutral applications of belonging. This research is significant in providing a starting point for *what* needs to be supported to cultivate belonging among African-American students. In identifying the primary importance of race in creating belonging for African-American students, RIT also helped redefine belonging through an African-American lens outside of Goodenow (1993a). This redefining of belonging opened my review to a large body of literature outside of the field of belonging that centered on the importance of race and identity when supporting African-American students. This repositioning of belonging as being anchored in identity helped provide historical parallels of what belonging has looked like for African-American students. While these findings stemming from RIT research are valuable, they are limited in providing teachers' pedagogical strategies, understandings, and practices for *how* to support and cultivate positive levels of racial centrality for African Americans.

CRP, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995b), sheds light on the third research question, which examines pedagogical practices employed by African-American teachers to support racial identity and self-concept (i.e., racial centrality) for African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2008). Ladson-Billings, an African-American researcher and educator, pioneered the term and framework of CRP and has written extensively about the benefits and

importance of culturally responsive pedagogy for all students, particularly African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2022). The CRP scholarship provides practical strategies and approaches that educators can implement to support the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students. Ladson-Billings (1995b) identified cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success (evidence of student learning) as the three core pillars of CRP that can lead to more meaningful and effective teaching experiences. Research demonstrates CRP's significant impact on sustaining African-American students' identities and fostering positive academic experiences and outcomes.

To explore the socio-political-institutional context of African-American belonging, I compliment RIT and CRP research with a CRT lens. CRT sheds light on the first two research questions by examining the socio-political-institutional impact of race on belonging and how systemic inequity factors in African-American student belonging. CRT also sheds light on the fourth research question by exploring the impact of experiential knowledge, positioning, and identity on teaching. By adding components or tenets from CRT, I am able to understand how various intersections of power impact belongingness for African-American students. CRT highlights how the intersection of race, law, policy, social context, and power perpetuates systemic disparities that disproportionately impact marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005; Gordon, 1999). As it pertains to schools, CRT is interested in, but not limited to, how school policies (for example, curriculum and discipline policy), school demographics (such as funding or ethno-racial demographics), and local social contexts cultivate or create barriers to belonging.

This includes an understanding of how institutional practices, dominant cultural norms, and political context impact belonging for African-American students. CRT identifies the impact

of positioning and experiential knowledge (the knowledge and understanding that is gained through personal experiences, particularly those related to race and racism) on its relationship to teaching and competencies in supporting African-American students. A CRT framework within education investigates the possibility of transforming the relationship between law and racial power and, more broadly, pursues a project of achieving racial emancipation and institutional equity within schooling (Crenshaw, 1995).

Takeaways from Socially Deprived Anti-Black Schooling Narratives

This review also documented notable research on African Americans and schooling beginning in the 1960s that perpetuate a dominant narrative of deficiency and social deprivation that negates African-American students' belonging. During this time, the facilitation of school integration was anchored in the dominant belief, stemming from research by Coleman (1966), that African-American students needed to be in the presence of (or belong to) white educational spaces or whiteness in order to learn how to value, excel, and experience academic success (Katz, 1964; Coleman et al., 1966; Geary, 2015). These publications fail to name any assets of African-American schooling or the impact of flagrant systemic and institutional racism on African-American education, particularly in the 1960s (and prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964).

This deficit-centered research was paired with one-way integration practices, which resulted in the closing of African-American schools and the termination of African-American teachers and administrators across the country. This fortified the large-scale anti-Black ideology and beliefs that spaces with a critical mass of African-American teachers, administrators, and students have little value to offer in rigorous academic spaces. The practice of one-way

integration, that is, the assimilation of individuals or groups (in this case, African Americans) from one culture into another dominant culture (predominantly white educational spaces) marks the beginning of the large-scale African-American educational debt (reframed terminology; often referred to as the achievement gap).

This practice of one-way integration as opposed to a reinvestment in African-American schooling alongside mutually incorporated schooling options (where individuals or communities from dominant and marginalized cultures interact and engage with each other in a way that is respectful and equitable) was predicated on a now-disproven stereotype reinforced by Coleman's (1966) research—that African Americans do not value education. While examining post-integration data about the success of Coleman's (1966) recommendations of one-way integration and the displacement of African-American students at large, findings show that a full or successful incorporation of African Americans into U.S. schooling has yet to exist (Ladson- Billings, 1995b; Love, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

This review does not justify the creation of spaces where African Americans do not feel belonging, which is redefined in this paper as a sense of critical belonging. It demonstrates the resilience, persistence, and savviness that African Americans have had to demonstrate in the educational pipeline despite actively dealing with multiple levels and forms of institutional and systemic racism to experience success in the U.S. This research demonstrates that when African-American students are supported or feel belonging through counter spaces rooted or led by African-American experiential knowledge that acknowledge and actively buffer against various forms of systemic racism and inequity within schooling, they are not only

If successful, they can outperform all student groups, as was demonstrated at the highly underresourced Dunbar School.

Whom or What do African-American Students "Need" to Belong to?

The problematic narrative that African-American community members are deemed as property that needs to belong to someone or something to have value is long reflected in the history of African-American schooling and call for reconceptualization when referring to African-American students. Research by Coleman (1966), which prompted school integration, argued that African-American students weren't marginalized systemically by the Jim Crow education system. Coleman (1966) posited the now-debunked African-American stereotype that African-American students needed to integrate into white education spaces because he believed that African-American communities didn't value education and needed to be in the presence of whites to learn how to do so (Walker, 1996; Fairclough, 2004). Following Coleman's (1966) findings, African-American schools were shut down, African-American educators were dismissed or fired, and one-way integration, i.e., the integration of African-American students into white space as opposed to mutual integration, was based on the false belief that African-American education spaces (or education spaces of color) were inferior. The African-American-white binary presented by Coleman presents notions of assimilation and white supremacy ideology, in that only those who attempt to assimilate into whiteness and shed their "inferior" schools and backgrounds can experience success and humanity in schools. The Coleman et al. report (1966) marks the beginning of mainstream belief systems which ascribe to the myth that families of color have low educational aspirations and need to avoid the "deficits" present within African-American schools and schools of color. This narrative reproduces white supremacy ideology, where low performance and competence are associated with racial groups. Valencia (2002) found the same myth applied to Mexican American families, arguing the myth lies in the pseudoscientific notion of deficit framing that blames the victim rather than holding

inequitable schooling arrangements culpable" (p.81). According to Rice University (2013), African-American communities are the most likely of all ethnic groups to emphasize the importance of education. In the context study and in contrast with Colemans's (1966) findings, African-American students and teachers not only valued education and experienced academic success, but they did so without the presence of any white leadership, white cultural values, or the need to belong to a predominately white or non-African-American school. Furthermore, African-American teachers repositioned education not only to support students professionally and academically but to be a tool of liberatory practice that positively impacted the racial identity and continual resilience of African-American students, their communities, and their families.

Future Research and the Need for a Critical Belonging Framework

This review of research demonstrates a need for a redefinition or conceptualization of belonging when referring to African-American students and marginalized students at large (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011). The limitations in research call for a term and/or critical framework that identifies the s*tructural, institutional, social, and political factors* that impact student belonging (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Castles & Davidson, 2000; Maira, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The review also complicates the use of the term belonging when referring to the success of African-American students in the U.S. This review also calls for a multidimensional perspective regarding the framework of belonging. This includes an awareness, rooted in criticality, of how the term belonging is defined, received, experienced, and historically applied, particularly for marginalized students.

The term belonging holds historical connections dating back to slavery for African

Americans in the U.S. When looking at the connection between slavery, education, and belonging, African Americans were deemed property that actually needed to belong to white slave owners because of ill-founded savior narratives (supported by false science) about the inferiority of African Americans (particularly their intelligence) to justify their enslavement (Kipling, 1899; Van Ells, 1995). Beliefs regarding African Americans needing to "belong" to whiteness are also present within the integration movement. Coleman (1966) argued that African-American students need to be in the presence of white students and teachers to understand how to "value" education.

The white supremacist assumptions behind whom/what African Americans need to belong to in schooling to experience their full humanity or success, that often being whiteness or cultural norms and/or standards rooted in whiteness, hold their roots in slavery and serve the purpose of maintaining the subordination of African-American students. According to Bell (2019) historically, mass public education for African Americans was intent on preserving the slavery social order, solidifying white supremacy ideology through schooling, and a curriculum that communicated the dominant sociocultural expectations, norms, and values. In his work from the 1930s, Woodson (1933/2017) discovered that the Eurocentric curriculum was similar to propaganda in that it instilled conformity and inferiority in African-American students. This holds a connection to integration, where Coleman's (1966) problematic findings reified stereotypical assumptions that assumed African-American students needed to belong to white schooling institutions or be in the presence of whites to learn how to value education or be successful in school.

Considering the complex history and connections between African-American education, enslavement, and the term "belonging," this review of research demonstrates a need to

reposition or reframe belonging when referring to both African-American students and marginalized students at large (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; DeNicolo et al., 2017). A critical and multi-dimensional belonging framework is needed that identifies the s*tructural, institutional, social, political, and contextual factors* impacting belonging alongside nuances in how it is defined, experienced, received, and applied, particularly for marginalized communities. A complication of the assumptions behind whom or what African-American students need to "belong" to experience academic success is particularly needed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I used research designs by Boston and Warren (2017), Goodenow & Grady (1993), and Powell et al. (2017) to guide the design of the student and teacher interviews. Qualitative methodology was selected because it facilitates an in-depth and nuanced exploration of individuals' experiences related to race and how such experiences influence their sense of belonging. Furthermore, few studies create space for African-American students and educators to voice their own sense of belonging in schools (Booker, 2016). Prior scholarship has found that qualitative protocol utilizes open-ended questions, which may elicit more complex and nuanced responses surrounding the various social, institutional, and individual factors surrounding race that shape one's daily experiences (Chapman & Gunby, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018). Consequently, I modified Boston and Warren's (2017) quantitative protocol questions for the interview protocol, student focus groups, and teacher interviews to create space for narrative data (see Appendices A, C, D, and E). CRP and RIT are used to identify how teacher pedagogy factors into student belongingness for African-American students. Finally, I conducted a CRT analysis to explore how social, historical, institutional, and political factors facilitate or create barriers to generating belonging among African-American students.

Research Site Overview

This study took place over two semesters at Sankofa High and Fannie Lou Hamer High (both of which are in Southern California), with two equity-minded African-American teachers who each taught two separate courses (Table 1).

The classroom at Fannie Lou Hamer High was immersed in a tranquil yet electrifying

ambiance. Students, brimming with enthusiasm, eagerly took their seats, engaged in animated conversations about their post-school plans and ongoing social justice events in the world, and eagerly anticipated their upcoming assignments. The walls, adorned with captivating displays of student projects, vividly depicted the historical events that had shaped present-day forms of inequity, inspiring a deep sense of reflection and determination. The carefully arranged desks, positioned in circular clusters, fostered a sense of collaboration, inviting students to engage in group work, lively interactions, and collective orientations toward academic exploration. In the back corner, a collection of grade-level inspirational and empowering books was placed on a table. Sunlight streamed in through the single, clear wall, illuminating the scene and granting glimpses of students waving and working quietly at tables as they passed through periods. The charged atmosphere of positive and lively student interaction slowly transformed into attentive silence as Teacher Teagues began her lesson. Fannie Lou Hamer High School is a public charter secondary school in Southern California that opened in the last ten years. It is part of a larger urban school district and serves 458 students. Fannie Lou Hamer High School has 92% students of color, 9% of whom are African American. Additionally, 74% of the students are reported to be on free and reduced lunch.

As I walked into the classroom at Sankofa High School, I was met with an explosion of vivid classroom decor and invigorating energy that permeated the air. The walls were decorated with an array of vibrant quotes, clippings from history books, and captivating art pieces that reflected the rich social-justice culture of the class and school at large. The room was alive with the spirit of the students, with their assignments and work from the semester proudly displayed. As the students passed by, they could not help but wave and exchange greetings with Teacher Tolson, a local figure who is deeply involved with the student community. Students,

alumni, administrators, and community members often entered the classroom, seeking guidance or simply desiring a heartfelt connection, conversing about their weekend. The classroom buzzed with conversations among the teacher, the teacher's aide, and the students, who were sharing stories about the weekend's recent happenings, including spirited discussions about school events, things taking place in the local community, and upcoming plans for the future, such as college. Teacher Tolson's class radiated a scholarly atmosphere of laughter and joy, fostering a warm environment where students' lived experiences merged with the overarching learning objectives of cultivating intersectional racial equity that would sustain the students and their communities. Sankofa High has a rich, longstanding history in the African-American community. It is an urban public high school located in Southern California. It is part of a larger urban school district and serves approximately 2100–2700 students. The school opened over 60 years ago and was originally a middle school. Sankofa High School has 93% students of color, 19% of whom are African American. Furthermore, 84% of the students are reported to be on free and reduced lunch.

Rationale for the Research Site

I chose these research sites because the teachers, student demographics, and school culture met the following criteria: teachers were equity-minded (see Definition of terms); teacher practices aligned with the three primary tenets of CRP; teachers identified as African American, a critical mass of students in the classrooms identified as African American; the courses focused on race, identity, critical consciousness, and African-American history; and the teachers taught in urban school settings with racially and socially diverse student populations. Each of the two school sites centered on equity and social justice within their school culture,

and each school held a critical mass of African-American students. Critical mass is defined as a percentage of a population that is higher than the city average, higher than the state average, and close to, equivalent to, or more than the national average, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Teachers Selected for the Study

My criteria for selecting African-American teachers aligned with the literature review data (Chapter 2) that indicated the various pedagogical practices of teachers who had taught African-American students, demonstrating outcomes and experiences that aligned with definitions of belonging as outlined in Chapter 1 (under Definition of terms). Teaching practices and expertise that aligned with the literature review data, which proved impactful in supporting African-American students, included fostering of cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Additionally, criteria proven helpful in supporting belonging for African-American students included teachers who demonstrated experiential knowledge as an equity-minded African American, a commitment to social justice, graduate education, and ongoing training in topics of race, equity, and identity in schools, strong connections with the local African-American community, strong community partnerships, and extensive experience in the teaching field, cultivating positive academic experiences for African-American students.

The two teachers selected aligned with the participant criteria. Both teachers were consistently recommended by multiple high-performing social-justice African-American educators who taught in various graduate departments of UC San Diego. At Fannie Lou Hamer High School, I worked with Teacher Teagues and collected data from two of her classes. Teacher Teagues identifies as an African-American woman, is trained as a social-justice

educator, and holds a master's degree in education. She also has over ten years of experience as an instructor. At Sankofa High, I observed Teacher Tolson and two of his classes. Teacher Tolson identifies as an African-American man and is trained as a social-justice educator. He holds a master's degree in education, and he has over 10 years of experience as an instructor.

Data Collection

I collected data over a span of six months with a total of 41 African-American participants from four courses across four academic quarters (Table 1). Of the 41 participants, 39 were students and 2 were teachers. Each school operates on both a semester and quarter system, which means that each semester consists of two quarters. I collected data during the second quarter (Q2) of the 2021 Spring semester remotely (due to pandemic restrictions) and both quarters of the 2021 Fall semester in person. During Q2 of the 2021 Spring semester and all of the 2021 Fall semester, I conducted a total of 69 observations, 14 student focus groups, five semi-structured individual student interviews, and four teacher pre- and post-interviews across eight separate class periods (Table 1) in the two high schools. Data collection in the 2021 Spring semester took place over Zoom and telephone due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Table 1. Data Collection

	Fannie Lou Hamer High School				Sankofa High School			
	Spring 2021		Fall 2021		Spring 2021		Fall 2021	
	11th Grade Civics (referred to as Mock trial) 1A	AP History Class 1B	Regular 11th Grade History 1D	AP History Class 1C	9th Grade Ethnic Studies Class 2A	11th Grade Ethnic Studies Class 2B	9th Grade Ethnic Studies Class 2C	11th Grade Ethnic Studies Class 2D
Semester of Data Collection	Spring 2021 (quarter 2 of semester)	Spring 2021 (quarter 2 of semester)	Fall 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2021 (quarter 2 of semester)	Spring 2021 (quarter 2 of semester)	Fall 2021	Fall 2021
Number of Students	22	24	22	24	24	27	33	36

Table 2. Data Collection (Continued)

# African American students	5	8 (Same 3 African American students also in the Mock Trial Course)	4	1	6	5	6	7
# Observations	12	12	13	13	18	18	22	22
Teacher pre-/post-interviews	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
# Focus groups	0	2	1	0	2	1	2	2
# of individual student interviews	1	4	0	1	0	0	1	0
# of African-American students interviewed	5	8	4	1	6	5	6	7

Fannie Lou Hamer High School

At Fannie Lou Hamer High School, I conducted a total of 25 observations, seven focus groups, four semi-structured student interviews, and two teacher pre- and post-interviews in two classes across one and a half semesters (Table 1), which also consisted of three academic quarters.

In the 2021 Spring semester, I studied Class 1A, a civics course called “Mock Trial” and Class 1B, an AP History Class, both classes were taught by Teacher Teagues remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. I conducted 12 classroom observations (eight of which were 90-minute long) in Class 1A and 1B, and one 30-minute semi-structured student interview. I did not conduct any focus groups during the 2021 Spring semester in Class 1A. The number of permission slips received was not enough to create a focus group. As a result, I conducted an individual, semi-structured interview. In Spring Class 1B, I conducted two 20–30-minute focus groups, and four 30-minute semi-structured interviews. A 60-minute teacher pre interview also took place in Spring quarter.

In the 2021 Fall semester, I conducted 13 observations, one focus group, and one semi-structured student interview. I conducted 13 weekly 90-minute observations for Class 1D and 1C. I also conducted a 30-minute focus group for Class 1D. The teacher was also transitioning out of the classroom and into an administrative leadership position, resulting in the expense of a limited amount of time to conduct follow-up interviews. As a result, I was able to conduct one individual semi-structured interview and a post-teacher interview at the end of the study following fall quarter.

Sankofa High School

At Sankofa High School, I conducted a total of 40 observations, seven focus groups, one semi-structured individual student interview, and a teacher pre- and post-interview with Teacher Tolson in two ethnic studies courses (Table 1 and Table 2). One ethnic studies class was in the 9th grade, and the second ethnic studies class was in the 11th grade. Data collection took place during the 2021 Spring and Fall semesters.

In the 2021 Spring semester, I conducted 18 observations, three focus groups, and one teacher interviews across two classes, Class 2A and 2B (Table 2). I conducted 18 weekly 90-minute observations for the duration of the quarter. I conducted three 20–30-minute focus groups based on the students. I also conducted a 60-minute teacher pre interview at the beginning in Spring quarter.

In the 2021 Fall semester, I conducted 22 observations, four focus groups, and one semi-structured individual student interview, and two teacher interviews in Classes 2C and 2D (Table 2). I conducted weekly 90-minute class observations for the duration of the quarter. A total of three 20–30-minute focus groups and one 30-minute semi-structured interview took place across both classes. In the first class, Class 2C, one 20-minute student focus group took place. I offered two focus areas in the second class rather than one due to student availability. Not all students were available for the first focus group offering. I completed a post teacher interview following the end of fall semester.

Research Protocols

Boston and Warren's (2017) three primary indicators of belonging (private regard, public regard, and racial centrality) guided the analysis of the student and teacher interview data and helped identify examples of African-American students' belonging. Public regard pertains to an individual's perception of how African Americans are viewed by others, while private regard pertains to one's own internalized feelings and beliefs about African Americans (Boston & Warren, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). Byrd and Chavous (2011) proposed that racial centrality, private regard, and public regard are not independent of each other but interact to influence attitudes and behaviors surrounding race and identity.

Boston and Warren's (2017) indicators were selected from a larger list of indicators developed by Sellers et al. (1998) for African Americans. Boston and Warren (2017) found that racial centrality had the most stable and consistent relationship with belonging for African-American students (Boston & Warren, 2017). Boston and Warren's (2017) belonging indicators were selected for this study because they are unique to African-American students and their belonging. Moreover, Boston was the only researcher I could find in my literature review (Chapter 2) with a strengths-based belonging protocol specifically designed for African-American students who was also an equity-minded African-American researcher. The centering of critical experiential knowledge, reflected in the scholarship of equity-minded African-American expertise, was a key tenet within the theoretical framework (discussed later) that guided the overall study, including the selection of instruments that measured belonging.

The observation protocol was borrowed from Powell et al.'s (2017) culturally responsive instruction observation protocol (Appendix F). Although Dr. Powell is not African American, her scholarship offered the only published culturally responsive observation protocol that I was able to find for this study.

I also used school data such as student demographics, teacher demographics, and school funding to supplement the study. The belonging indicators and protocols listed above guided the analysis of teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations. I used teacher interviews to gather information about teacher pedagogy, curriculum, and student experiences. The pre-teacher interview (Appendix C) was 60 minutes long and provided contextual information, such as the teacher's background and training, which impacted classroom experiences. The purpose of the post-teacher interview was to explore classroom examples and the strategies I documented during classroom observations that facilitated or created barriers to belonging (Appendix D). The post-teacher interviews were also 60-minute long. Teacher interviews were transcribed upon completion and then analyzed for emergent themes that aligned with the research questions. The teacher interview protocol examined if and how Boston and Warren's (2017) three predictors for African-American belonging are being supported via teaching pedagogy. The protocol also examined the impact of teacher pedagogy on the indicators of belonging. CRP was utilized to examine the impact of teacher pedagogy on African-American students' belonging. CRP provided insights into how teachers' pedagogical choices impacted African-American students' cultural identities, including their racial identities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This aligns with the primary indicator of belonging, which is racial centrality, where critical consciousness and cultural competence are used to develop a positive understanding of race and self-concept for African-American students (Alim et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The student interview protocol examined if and how Boston and Warren's (2017) and Sellers et al.'s (1998) three predictors for African-American belonging, primarily racial centrality, were experienced or cultivated inside and outside the classroom (Appendix A).

Boston and Warren (2017) provided a quantitative survey protocol to measure belonging along these three specific indicators. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of qualitative protocols to identify African-American belonging. Therefore, I modified the quantitative format of questions used by Boston and Warren (2017) into a qualitative format to create space for the African-American voice due to the reasons mentioned earlier. Student focus groups documented how African-American students experienced (or did not experience) belonging throughout the semester. I utilized focus group data to identify moments where teaching strategies, school policies and rules, and peer interactions led to shifts in student belonging. I transcribed and analyzed the focus group data for emergent themes that aligned with the research questions. I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with African-American students to gain additional data relevant to the study. I selected African-American students for semi-structured interviews if they did not speak much during focus groups or if I needed them to further elaborate on the data they provided to better answer my research questions. African-American students were also selected for individual semi-structured interviews if they were unable to attend the focus groups. Focus groups were open to all students; however, African-American student data (from interviews and observations) were primarily analyzed as the research questions center on the experiences of African-American students.

I used classroom observations to explore student–teacher interactions and peer-to-peer interactions and to understand how belonging is fostered in the classroom (Appendix F). I conducted a minimum of one 60–90-minute weekly observation per teacher throughout the study. The length of the observation varied depending on the length of the class. Some classes were on a 90-minute blocked timeframe, while others were on the 50-minute standard class schedule. Observation data provided the opportunity for me to see the real-time impact of

teaching pedagogy and whether a class is more individual or community oriented. I used handwritten field notes while conducting observations and then made connections to research questions. I borrowed the observation protocol from Powell et al.'s (2017) culturally responsive protocol. I selected this protocol because it aligns with the CRP framework that guides this study. Researchers studying CRP are interested in the ways in which pedagogy, critical consciousness (for teachers and students), and student academic performance foster belonging in peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student interactions. This initial protocol provides various themes to identify culturally relevant and responsive instruction. Since my study is qualitative, I removed the scoring aspect of the protocol but kept the culturally responsive indicators to identify connections between culturally responsive teaching and belonging. I then examined how indicators for the culturally responsive protocol impacted belonging (i.e., students' racial centrality, personal regard, and public regard).

Data Analysis

The four research questions aim to explore the following: 1) What does a sense of belonging look like for African-American students? 2) How does race factor into belonging for African-American students? 3) How do African-American teachers cultivate a sense of belonging for African-American students? 4) How does racial identity influence the pedagogy of African-American teachers? I will use RIT indicators of belonging developed by Sellers et al. (1998) and Boston and Warren (2017) to provide an understanding of how to identify belonging across these four research questions. I will then conduct a CRT and CRP analysis to document specific teacher experiences, examples, and practices that align, support, or negate African American belonging indicators at the interpersonal and structural level.

RIT provides a lens or indicators for identifying African-American students' belonging across all four research questions. It identifies racial centrality (the impact of race on one's self-concept) as the primary indicator of fostering belonging for African-American students (Boston & Warren, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). This is significant for providing a starting point for *what* needs to be supported in order to cultivate belonging among African-American students. In identifying the primary importance of race in creating a sense of belonging for African-American students, RIT also helped redefine belonging through an African-American lens, focusing on the impact of identity on educational experiences. A CRT analysis sheds light on the first two research questions by examining the socio-political-institutional impact of race on indicators of African-American belonging. CRT also sheds light on the fourth research question by exploring the impact of experiential knowledge, positioning, and identity on teaching. Findings from the CRP analysis, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995b), shed light on the third and fourth research questions, which examine the impact of teacher pedagogy and teacher's racial identity on supporting African-American students' self-concept (i.e., racial centrality) (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2008).

A Note on General Belonging

Although indicators for general belonging (listed in Chapter 1) were still explored in connection with CRP and CRT, it is important to note that indicators for RIT are centered in the findings due to the stronger evidence and connections to African-American students' belonging found both in this study and in the previous research mentioned in the literature review. Definitions of general belonging (listed in Chapter 1) are helpful in understanding the interpersonal aspects of belonging. However, they are limited in providing an understanding of

the experiences of marginalized students in that they fail to consider how social-historical-political context, identity, and cultural nuances factor into belonging (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; DeNicolo et al, 2017).

RIT and Sense of Belonging

I used coding constructs from Boston and Warren (2017) to identify African-American student belonging while analyzing data. RIT and general belonging codes were used to analyze data from student focus group interviews, observations, and teacher interviews. As discussed earlier, research supports the idea that racial identity is a primary indicator of a sense of belonging for African-American students. Boston and Warren (2017) provided three codes that are indicators of a sense of belonging among African-American students. These three codes and their definitions are presented below:

1. *Personal regard*: It is one's own regard for one's race (Boston & Warren, 2017).
2. *Public regard*: It is the perception of how others regard one's race (Boston & Warren, 2017).
3. *Racial centrality*: It is the dominance of race on one's self-concept (Boston & Warren, 2017).

Additional indicators for belonging will also be used to explore the data and document potential interpersonal connections to belonging. Indicators for general belonging include the following:

1. *Sense of community*: It is the feeling that the members of a community have of belonging. It is the feeling that members' identities matter to one another and to the

group. It is a shared faith that members' needs will be met and advocated for through a commitment to one another (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Mcmillan & Chavis, 1986).

2. *General belonging*: It is the extent to which students feel their identity is personally accepted, respected, included, and supported (Goodnowe, 1993).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

CRP is employed in this study as a means to identify how teacher pedagogy factors into belonging for African-American students. CRP indicators and their impact on RIT and general belonging codes (for example, racial centrality) will be explored to understand the impact of teacher pedagogy on belonging. Ladson-Billings (1995b) argued that CRP educators must support the development of academic performance, cultural competence, and criticality or critical consciousness. These CRP codes will be used to analyze teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student focus groups:

1. Academic performance: It is the evidence of student learning and student engagement.
2. Cultural competence: It is a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable teachers to work effectively with students in cross-cultural situations (Gay & Howard, 2003; Ladson Billings, 2008).
3. Critical consciousness: It is a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows participants to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

I conducted a CRT analysis to explore how social, historical, institutional, and political factors facilitate or create barriers to African-American students' belonging. Examples of institutional barriers include federal, state, and district policies, local laws, teacher demographics, and common practices and systems of beliefs rooted in white heteronormative privilege. Examples of structural barriers include school and classroom practices, curriculum, tracking and scheduling, school resources and funding, and school demographics. I used CRT to explore the relationship between these concepts with examples, practices, and mechanisms that supported African-American students' belonging, documented in the prior RIT analysis. The CRT concepts below will be used to analyze primary research documents, student profile sheets, and teacher interviews.

1. *Embeddedness of race*: The concept demonstrates how race is embedded within student, teaching, and school practices. It indicates how race shapes the daily interactions of all individuals and is used by dominant racial groups to maintain power (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).
2. *Experiential knowledge*: It is the valuing, centering, or demonstration of knowledge by teachers whose encounters of culture and race provide irreplaceable nuanced knowledge in understanding, navigating, and supporting race (Yosso, 2005).
3. *Challenging of the dominant ideology*: It is the presence or absence of cultural standards, which include notions of dominance and white middle-class norms. Examples can include meritocracy and the absence of race (Hartlep, 2009).
4. *Intersectionality*: It refers to additional intersecting layers of racialized subordination based on (but not limited to) gender, class, sexuality, disability, immigration status,

surname, phenotype, language, ethnicity, and/or religion (Crenshaw, 1988; Yosso, 2005).

5. *Whiteness as property*: Harris (1993a) gives us four "rights" or means by which whiteness as property propagates white privilege. These four rights include the right to exclusion, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to disposition, and the right to reputation and status. This code will explore these four rights and how disruption of or maintenance of these rights impact belonging for African American students.
6. *Institutional factors*: These constitute the laws, policies, practices, demographics, history, and social or political context that impact teacher pedagogy and student experiences.
7. *Colorblindness*: It is the perspective that skin color is insignificant and does not limit a person's opportunities. This perspective ignores the under-representation and inequity that people of color experience as a result of racial categories.

Trustworthiness of Data

Triangulation and member checking were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Birt et al. 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure triangulation, multiple sources of data were collected (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Data sources included student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observation. I triangulated the data by cross-referencing and comparing information from each different data source to increase the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information. Triangulation also helped identify nuances or inconsistencies in the data, prompting further investigation to ensure the reliability and consistency of the information being shared.

I also engaged in member checking with students and teachers to ensure the

trustworthiness of the data. Member checking returns findings to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et. al, 2016). The application of member checking took place in the form of exit interviews with the teachers in the study. Following the completion of the study, follow-up interviews were conducted with teachers to ensure that the interpretation of their experiences, students' experiences, and classroom experiences was accurate. Teachers not only confirmed the data but also provided additional information to help answer my research questions; moreover, they showed appreciation for being included in the research process.

Statement of Positionality

As an African-American man, critical educator, and parent, I believe a discussion on positioning is warranted due to my professional and cultural connections to the study. Epistemologically, my personal and professional lived experiences are sources of knowledge that have guided this study. As an African-American man navigating the education system on the west coast of the U.S., I can attest to the deep sense of isolation and disconnect that results from a lack of representation of African-American teachers and mentors in the classroom. These experiences (and literature review data) make it apparent that the lack of critical mass and representation (as a result of structural marginalization) of equity-minded African-American teachers, mentors, students, and community members reinforces anti-Black bias for both African-American students and non-African-American students (Milner, 2006; Tillman, 2004; Walker & Archung, 2003; Walker, 2018). Anti-Black bias harms all students; however, it is African-American (and Black) children and youth who endure the greatest brunt of this systemic form of violence that has persisted for centuries.

My epistemological understanding is rooted in my history, identity, experiences, and academic training. Critical race epistemologies recognize students of color as holders and creators of knowledge (Parker & Lynn, 2002). I came of age during the late 1980s and the 1990s. Consequently, my early understanding of race is situated in an era of colorblindness, where discussions of race were often dismissed, viewed as something of the past, or minimized (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). These experiences and the lack of agency in dealing with racial marginalization, alongside its aggressive resurgence through today's anti-CRT movement, evoked my interest in the relationship between race and African-American students' belonging in school.

My first African-American teachers and mentors (whom I did not meet until college) understood, explained, and advocated against many systemic challenges that I faced in the education pipeline, many of which I was unable to identify (due to the lack of education). This support, critical consciousness, and awareness transformed (and modeled) the trajectory of my academic career in a positive direction for the first time. My first Black teachers and mentors (and teachers of color) were often the only ones who provided me with the necessary support, affirmation, feedback, and career-changing opportunities that were paramount in my realization of my full self. Now, as a parent of two, I remain acutely aware of the persistent myths and dominant ideologies that minimize and marginalize African-American educational spaces. It has been a never-ending battle to explain the value, importance, rigor, and unique forms of cultural capital that can be received in equity-minded low-income African-American schools and in equity-minded African-American schools at large. In my personal experience, educators, colleagues, friends, family members, and peers often subscribe to dominant anti-Black schooling narratives, urging parents to do anything but send their kids to a Black school. These

deficit-centered narratives (rooted in stereotypes) about low-income schools of color, particularly Black spaces, stem from stereotypes perpetuated by Coleman (1966) and reify the marginalization of Black schools (for example, in de facto segregation and white flight). Amidst this constant problematic anti-Black dominant ideology, I have remained dedicated in my commitment to ensuring that my children have access to the same resources and opportunities that were pivotal in the success of my own educational journey.

My unique positioning informs my epistemology. I too have experienced the inequity that is heavily documented in the research on African-American schooling discussed in Chapter 2. I have come to regard these experiences as tools that provide an enhanced, complex, and unique understanding of the institution of race and anti-Blackness. Dominant narratives regarding objectivity may discount my experiential knowledge as biased. However, Delgado-Bernal & Villalpando (2002) posited that due to the intersectional nature of identity, marginalized communities hold vastly different views and experiences of what counts as knowledge, specifically regarding language, culture, and commitment to communities (Delgado-Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). The knowledge gained from these experiences has enhanced my understanding of how current theories on belongingness and CRT can complement one another and be further expanded. This includes an understanding of how to value, support, and create inclusion around African-American belonging. All in all, my professional research and personal experiences have led me to conduct this study. My roles as a critical educator and parent do not negatively bias my perceptions in this study. Rather, I am providing a counter narrative for how one’s cultural and professional experiences can add, as opposed to subtract, to the wealth of knowledge and research that is used to guide this study.

Limitations of the Study Design

COVID-19 restrictions limited the amount of interview and face-to-face time available, which impacted both my data collection and interview sample sizes. Focus groups during the pandemic often had all of my participants, per class, in one focus group, which often resulted in larger focus groups. I feel that breaking these focus groups into two may have created space to allow participants who were not as vocal to speak. In the first semester, during remote data collection, I was able to follow up with the participants who were not as vocal to allow for a deeper probing of in-depth data. However, when in-person classes resumed, due to COVID-19 and a lack of vaccine consistency among students, limitations were imposed on face-to-face interviews with respect to time. I myself contracted COVID-19, which also impacted my ability to conduct in-person observation and follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This, combined with school COVID-19 restrictions and general student health concerns (which were expressed vocally by students), resulted in a smaller semi-structured interview sample size during the second half of the study. Most African-American student participants, however, were very vocal and provided rich data that answered many of my research questions during the focus group interviews. Consequently, I did not feel the need to follow up with many of them after the initial focus groups were conducted. Furthermore, I was able to have a semi-structured interview remotely during the first half of the study. Finally, I conducted one pre- and one post–teacher interview with each teacher to capture insights and data across the entire time span of the study. Although I wanted to conduct a 90-minute pre and post interview with both teachers for all eight classes, I wanted to be mindful of the teachers' time in my study. Data collection began in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic when the teachers in my classroom were creating a new form of curriculum and a completely new form of remote education, with

minimal support, on a level that has yet to be seen in the history of the U.S. Considering this context, teachers had very little time to spare, even less for their personal care. Although I was not able to capture as many of the minute details that 16 teacher interviews would have captured, I was still able to capture more than enough teacher interview data to answer my research questions.

Chapter 4: Data Findings and Analysis

There is a gap in research on belonging that undervalues the impact of systemic racism and white supremacy on African-American belonging and strategies to foster resistance and resilience at both systemic and individual levels (Booker, 2006). According to research by Bell (1992), race and racism are embedded systemically, and practices to disrupt racial inequity only at the personal level fail to holistically address the impact of race and racism. As a result, in this research, race has been analyzed at both structural and interpersonal levels for each question.

Racial centrality, or the impact of race on one's self-concept, is considered the strongest predictor of African-American belonging by Boston and Warren (2017). In addition to racial centrality, private regard, public regard, general belonging, and a sense of community have also been used as indicators to identify student belonging (Boston & Warren, 2017; Goodenow, 1993a; Mcmillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000; Sellers et al., 1998). Findings of how to support race and belonging are drawn from the data provided in each question. Each question identifies various teacher practices, policies, cultural norms, curricular strategies, community interactions, and student interactions that supported or negated African-American belonging indicators.

The following four primary research questions were used to analyze African-American belonging and organize the discussion of the findings:

1). What does a sense of belonging look like for African-American students?

2). How does race factor into belonging for African-American students?

3). How do equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belongingness in

African-American students?

4). How does racial identity influence the pedagogy of African-American teachers?

Race plays a primary role in how belonging is experienced by African-American students and intersects with each research question. The first research question addresses the general factors such as policies, socio-historical-political context, demographics, and general teaching practices that are needed to be in place to support belonging for African-American students. This is not to be confused with specific teacher practices that support and/or resist structural and interpersonal factors impacting African-American belonging. The second research question looks at the specific practices African-American teachers have used to support and navigate systemic and interpersonal belonging for African-American students. The third question examines how race factors into African-American belonging. The fourth question assesses the impact of racial identity and experiences surrounding race on African-American teacher pedagogy. All the research questions explore topics of race and equity; as a result, some factors may overlap or emerge in multiple research questions as more significant to fostering belonging.

What Does a Sense of Belonging Look Like for African-American Students?

This question explored factors that positively impacted belonging indicators such as centrality, private regard, public regard, and sense of community for African-American students.

Centrality, or how the student conceptualized themselves and what they were capable of, was positively supported through critical strengths-based African-American narratives, cross-racial solidarity with African Americans, district and school-wide resistance against anti-

Blackness, and strong student–teacher relationships paired with counter spaces. Public regard was positively impacted through critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity, a critical mass of African-American students and teachers, and resistance to school-to-prison nexuses through preventative and non-exclusionary disciplines African-American students. Private regard was positively impacted when classroom environments welcomed strengths-based narratives surrounding African-American identity and when teachers utilized counter-stereotypical content about African Americans. A sense of community was fostered through a supportive classroom environment, strong student-to-student relationships, an equity-based school culture, equity-minded African-American community partners, college-going cultures, and wrap-around services.

Centrality

Racial centrality refers to the impact of race on one's self-concept. Self-concept refers to how someone thinks about, evaluates, or perceives themselves; it can include what a person may believe they are capable of and their future decision-making processes. Since it pertains to what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students, centrality identifies interpersonal and institutional factors that positively impacted African-American students' self-concept or what they believed they were capable of. This research used student focus groups, semi-structured interviews, teacher interviews, and observation data to identify institutional mechanisms and/or interpersonal schooling experiences that supported or negated racial centrality. Critical strengths-based African-American narratives, cross-racial solidarity with African Americans, district and school-wide resistance against anti-Blackness, and strong student–teacher relationships paired with counter spaces, all had a positive impact on African-

American students' self-concept.

Critical Strengths-Based Narrative Centering African-American Identity

During the focus groups, students talked about the impact of critical strengths-based African-American narratives and how these narratives have shaped the ways African-American students conceptualized their futures, how they carried themselves, and what they felt they could accomplish.

The student interviews documented how critical strengths-based narratives centering African Americans had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Students Nina, Chaka, and Prince discussed the impact of critical strengths-based content, especially about African-American student identity and its impact, on the way African-American students conceptualize their future selves.

> Interviewer: Why is it [talking about race] so helpful to you as a student?
>
> Nina: Because we usually don't talk about ourselves like this in other classes. So, to see how much we've accomplished and how great we could be doing, that helps a lot with us trying to see our positive future.

For Nina, it was uncommon to hear strengths-based narratives about African Americans in prior coursework. She found that learning about African Americans who navigated the institutional challenges and nuances of identity, race, gender, and various additional forms of marginalization made her feel positive about her own future and what she was capable of. Chaka and Prince also expressed how learning about critical strengths-based scholarship by and about African Americans impacted how they carried themselves and what they felt they could accomplish.

Interviewer: Identity, race, gender, and things that are currently going on and tying that into history—is that kind of helpful? Is that something that you all like, and is that something that makes you want to engage in the course more?

Chaka: I was going to say that I can agree with that. But in terms of the class helping me shape how I see myself, I would kind of think that the class kind of helps me shape or kind of helps me understand how others see me and the history behind stuff that we see all the time in what we're learning. In relating to some of the topics, it kind of does help me. It helps me kind of learn how I should carry myself as a person in my daily life.

Prince further elaborated on Chaka's comments:

I would feel like yes, because the course is really specific to your background... Not only did your ancestors grow up during those times, but it's just kind of seeing yourself, that you're kind of able to do that as well; because you see, people who look like you, if they're able to accomplish it, okay, you can accomplish something based on that feat—if not even higher than something like that. So I feel like that encourages us.

Critical strengths-based African American culture had a positive impact on Prince's self-concept. Prince's statement, "If they're able to accomplish it, okay, you can accomplish something upon that feat—if not even higher than something like that," demonstrates a shift in the ways in which he conceptualized himself and what he was capable of.

The above data shows how institutional factors such as facilitating critical strengths-based curriculum and course offerings surrounding race and identity, particularly centered on African Americans, played a key role in creating a sense of belonging in African-American students.

Cross-Racial Solidarity with African Americans

Strengths-based content about marginalized communities who demonstrated solidarity with African Americans had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. In short, cross-racial solidarity with African Americans had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Students continually mentioned that historical narratives of cross-racial

solidarity with African Americans were one of their favorite and most inspiring parts of the course.

> Interviewer: What did you like about the class?
>
> Tina: All the movies he showed us about how, like the Black Panthers and then the Brown Berets, they were connected to Malcolm X.
>
> Otis: Brown Berets.

Student Fela expanded on how historical narratives about cross-racial solidarity with African Americans empowered him to work collectively with marginalized communities against social inequity.

> Interviewer: And then, when you're able to learn about your own community, how does that make you feel? When you learn about these empowering things that you're able to see yourself in, or that there's someone that you can connect to and that you relate to, how does that make you feel about the class? Or at least connecting to it?
>
> Fela: It makes me feel like I should join them. It makes me feel strong.
>
> Etta: Yeah. We can all [people of all races] get together and be like... How few years ago how, what they were doing [referring to Black and Brown solidarity in the 1960s]."

Fela and Etta mentioned harboring feelings of pride and dignity after being exposed to historical examples of African-American solidarity with various marginalized communities. After learning about strengths-based narratives of solidarity, Fela and Etta not only felt Black and Brown relations were capable of being improved but also felt empowered to participate in improving those relations themselves.

The strong motivation shown by Fela to join and unite marginalized communities in their fight against intersectional white supremacy and social inequity showcases a powerful impact on his sense of self. By repositioning their individualistic understandings of the self-concept to a larger collective meaning, Fela and Etta demonstrated a profound comprehension of their

ability to effect change at the individual level and the transformation or amplification of that ability when it is enacted through large-scale collective efforts. Fela's and Etta's transformation of self-concept showed the impact of strengths-based narratives about solidarity with African Americans on students' centrality.

District-wide and School-wide Resistance against Racism, anti-Blackness, and Social Inequity

Collective responsibility and resistance against structural and intersectional racism, at school-wide and district-wide levels, were also expressed by multiple students as a key component in supporting belonging and self-concept for African-American students. District-wide and school-wide resistance against racism, anti-Blackness, and social inequity had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Students talked about how school-wide and district-wide support for courses that educated them about racism, anti-Blackness, and social inequity had a positive impact on their self-concept.

> Interviewer: Do you feel it's the school's responsibility to teach about things like race and racism?
>
> All students: Yeah. Yes.
>
> Interviewer: And then, did you find that having those conversations later in life helped you out if there were things that happened to your group or community, or just knowing who you are and what you want to do in life? Did you find that those conversations helped you later in life?
>
> All African-American students: Yeah.
>
> Luther: It just makes me proud.
>
> Mingus: Knowing who I am... So, yeah.

Gladys also spoke about the importance and positive impact of resisting invisible, racist, or anti-

Black narratives.

> Interviewer: Do you think it should be the school's or district's responsibility to do that [teach about race]?
>
> Gladys: Of course, I do, because I feel like it's so overlooked, especially when you reflect on the past education of learning history in your history classes. It's just like you think about this world being one way, and then, once you go into high school, it's completely different. I think that it should definitely be something mandatory, at least.

Students elaborated on the importance of institutional resistance against anti-Black narratives and its impact on their self-concept.

> Interviewer: Okay. So we talked about how it should be the school's and district's responsibility to teach about these larger things. Is there anything else you feel like it should be the district's responsibility that the school should talk about more?

Students Whitney and Nina responded with specific content ideas.

> Whitney: Well, one thing they shouldn't talk about is… slavery more.
>
> Nina: And yeah, I think slavery was something really important, but I think they should also talk about more positive things that happened, that we've contributed to, to give us something more positive to look up to and stuff, to know that we weren't just oppressed our whole lives, that we've done great things too.

All African-American students and all students in general agreed that it should be the school's and district's responsibility to teach about race, racism, equity, and identity. All African-American students agreed that learning about race, racism, and equity was helpful in their daily lives outside of the course. All students agreed that when schools made institutional shifts such as offering courses or course content that discussed intersectional understandings of racism, anti-Blackness, and equity, students engaged in the course had an increased sense of confidence and experienced a transformation in how they conceptualized their future and what they were capable of. Students posited that, by not having mandatory policies about teaching race and identity, schools were complicit in failing to educate students about the material

realities of the world and to provide accurate forms of education surrounding the content they were learning.

Statements from Gladys clearly showed that when African-American students learned about narratives that focused on the strengths of African Americans, it had a positive effect on their ability to envision their futures.

Overall, students felt that district-wide policies requiring critical course offerings, curriculum, and content surrounding race had a positive impact on African-American students' understanding of themselves, the way they envisioned their self-concept, and what they could accomplish in the future.

Strong Student–Teacher Relationships Paired with Counter Spaces

Strong student–teacher relationships situated within counter spaces had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept and overall sense of belonging. In such spaces, deficits are challenged and/or a positive racial climate can be established (Solorzano et. al, 2000). Counter spaces can include affinity spaces, curricular content, the class itself (i.e., ethnic studies), individual relationships, or any space that involves the disruption of social inequities while supporting the identities and educational experiences of marginalized communities.

Counter spaces offered and modeled what hope and dignity could look like for an African-American girl navigating a system rooted in intersectional white supremacy ideology (anti-Blackness, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc.).

Counter spaces had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Chaka and Rosetta found that their positive relationship with their teacher, both within the

course and within their African-American affinity space, affirmed the ways in which they related to school, themselves, and their understanding of how to navigate the experiences of being African-American girls both inside and outside school. Rosetta talked about her relationship with her teacher.

> Interviewer: Okay. How would you describe your relationship with [Teacher Teagues] on an individual level?
>
> Rosetta: She's like a mom to me. So like I can come to her about anything.

Chaka detailed the ways in which their strong student–teacher relationship holds connections to counter spaces.

> Chaka: Not only is she my teacher, and she's a really good teacher, [but] I'm also involved with her in other clubs outside of class. So she and I get to interact a lot, and she's a teacher that I can feel comfortable with because I can relate to her on some levels. So it's a good relationship for me personally.
>
> Chaka: Not to just keeping it on race, but she is also one of the advisors for the Black Student Union Club that we have. So when we're in there, we get to have intimate discussions about our experiences being Black in school and outside of school. And I was able to hear some of the things that she had to say and relate to them in my own terms of experience. So it's things like that. And then her also being a woman, stuff like that...

Chaka's experiences with her teacher both in her class and within her affinity space helped Chaka relate to, learn, and navigate what it meant to be an African-American woman both inside and outside of school.

Strong student–teacher relationships paired with counter spaces played a crucial role in fostering a positive self-concept in African American students. Counter spaces achieve disruption of marginalization, mentorship, and cultural validation. Peers and teachers who cultivated strong equity-oriented spaces while supporting and believing in African-American student success positively impacted how students related to and understood their capabilities of

navigating their race and identity both within and outside of schools.

Public Regard

Public regard refers to how one feels their race is perceived. It identifies examples of how curriculum, course content, school experiences, and/or the larger school environment impacted or reflected the ways in which African-American students felt their race or intersectional identities were perceived. Public regard highlights interpersonal and institutional examples that supported or negated public regard, the ways in which African Americans were/are perceived, and their overall sense of belonging.

Critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity, a critical mass of African-American students and teachers, and resistance to school-to-prison nexuses through preventative and non-exclusionary discipline had a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students felt their race and/or intersectional identities were perceived.

Critical Strengths-Based Narratives Centering African-American Identity

Critical strengths-based narratives also impacted the ways in which African-American students felt their race and/or intersectional identities were perceived by non-African Americans. The students felt that strengths-based narratives surrounding African Americans had a positive impact on the ways in which they were perceived. Strengths-based narratives were documented to have a positive impact on African-American students' centrality; however, these narratives were also documented to have a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students felt they or their race were perceived or regarded by their non-African-American peers. Marvin felt that having strengths-based narratives about African Americans

had a positive impact on the ways in which African Americans and marginalized communities at large were perceived.

> Interviewer: Thank you. So, when you learn African-American history, does that change the way that you see that community? When you learn about Latinx folks and the contributions that they've made, does that change the way that you see that community or not go for it?
>
> Marvin: Oh, I guess it does in a sort of way. Because you learn more about it than what you... You learn new stuff. So stuff you didn't know before, and it changes your way, the way you see them, and stuff.

Marvin felt that the more one learned and complicated his views of marginalized communities through a strengths-based lens, the more it changed and complicated the ways in which African Americans were perceived.

Other students, for instance, Etta, felt that having critical discussions and education surrounding contemporary African-American social justice movements had a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students were perceived.

> Etta: Things like the BLM movement and things like that, and the Asian hate movement and things like that. We talked about that in other classes, like advisory and in other curricular classes as well. And I feel like those are important because somebody might not understand or somebody might just might not care about them. They can really learn and understand why these are important in our society and things like the past as well, how they affect today's society, and how people need to understand, okay. Kind of just telling them right from wrong and why you need to stick up for others as well. So I feel like those are important to include in class.

Etta felt that by not having strengths-based discussions about the contemporary social justice movement surrounding racial equity, people may not empathize with and/or understand the material harm instantiated against African Americans and marginalized communities and its negative impact on society as a whole. She felt that by creating education and awareness around racial equity, a general social or ethical responsibility could be cultivated for African Americans

(and marginalized communities), where all individuals are aware of their resistance to or complacency with racial and social inequities.

Critical Mass of African-American Students and Teachers

Having a diverse school community with a critical mass of African-American students and students of color had a positive impact on the ways in which African Americans felt their race and/or intersectional identity were perceived. A critical mass of African-American students and teachers impacted the ways in which African-American students felt their race and/or intersectional identities were perceived by non-African Americans.

> Interviewer: Can you ever think of a time when you were at school and you felt like maybe your race or your gender was a problem?

The students began to shake their heads from left to right, indicating no. Student Etta agreed and explained the students' body language.

> Etta: Because this school is diverse, I don't really worry about race problems.
> Interviewer: So, that makes a big difference, then (demographics)?
>
> Etta: Yeah.
>
> All students nodded their heads in agreement.

Etta posited that the critical mass of African-American students and students of color at large buffered against any negative racial perception about students of color. Student Prince also discussed how having a critical mass of African-American teachers and a larger African American population had a positive impact on the ways in which they were received.

> Prince: I feel like Black kids are supported in this school because we have different instructors and different staff members who are Black as well. And we also have things like BSU, which is our Black Student Union, a club that's not just for us, but it's

> somewhere that we can join and learn about Black history and things that are going on in the Black community today as well.

Prince felt that the substantial representation of African-American students and teachers acted as a protective barrier against negative racial perceptions and treatment. A critical mass of equity-minded African-American teachers helped buffer against negative regard while sustaining the identities of African-American students. Moreover, collective actions taken by the African-American community raised awareness among the broader school and/or classroom community, sparking conversations and creating opportunities that transformed the educational institution into a more equitable and supportive space for everyone.

Resistance to School-to-Prison Nexuses through Preventative and Non-Exclusionary Discipline

The school-to-prison nexus indicates the connection between schools, prisons, exclusionary discipline methods, and a myriad of practices that disproportionately funnel African-American students into the criminal justice system. Exclusionary discipline practices are one of the primary indicators of school-to-prison nexuses that often funnel African-American students from the classroom into the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010). Preventative school discipline refers to strategies and interventions designed to promote positive behavior and prevent the occurrence of disruptive behavior in educational settings (Bradshaw et al., 2009). It is a proactive approach that emphasizes the creation of safe and supportive learning environments.

Teachers who resisted school-to-prison nexuses through preventative and non-exclusionary discipline practices had a positive impact on the way in which African-American

students felt they were regarded and belonged in the course. When asked about school improvements, a student noted the number of fences on the property and how it impacted the ways in which she felt she was perceived.

> Tina: Less fences, I don't remember there being so many fences.
>
> Interviewer: Does it feel like a prison?
>
> Tina: Yeah. You know, it's just weird.
>
> Interviewer: The fences, that kind of shapes how your experiences are, how you feel like you're being perceived right, as a student and how you're being treated.
>
> Tina: Yeah (and all other students nod yes in agreement).

Other students noted more positive feelings and experiences at the school, noting how teachers resisted the school's prison nexuses through non-exclusionary discipline practices.

> Interviewer: Let's say there's an example where someone might get into trouble. Do you feel like your teacher will talk to them more, or do you feel like they'll just get booted out of class?
>
> Ray: I mean, I feel bad because I can say that I talk in class a lot, but… she would just tell me to just stop talking, and then I would just stop talking. So she's really not heavy on discipline… she kind of is, but she doesn't do things like send you out of the classroom or something like that.

Other students nodded, agreed, and further elaborated on Ray's statement on identifying various non-exclusionary discipline responses to student behavior and the ways in which it impacted his perception of the teacher's understanding of him as a student.

> Whitney: I think he'll talk to them more and try to help and guide them.
>
> Ray: Yeah, because he gives a lot of chances to make up for work and stuff. He's understanding.

The students continually expressed being situated within a supportive learning environment,

which aligns with the definition of preventative discipline practices as discussed earlier.

> Interviewer: Do you all feel academically and emotionally supported by the class?
>
> Fela: Yeah, we do.
>
> Aretha: Yeah. Yeah, we do.
>
> Tammi: I got to say yeah.
>
> Chaka: Yeah.
>
> Barry: Yes.
>
> All other students: Yeah

The students continually reported that a supportive learning environment and non-punitive discipline practices had a positive impact on how they felt their race was regarded by their teachers and peers. Teacher Teagues further elaborated on her intentionality toward using non-punitive and preventive discipline practices to support student belonging.

Specific preventative and/or non-punitive discipline practices were used with students in ways that were not punitive and had a positive impact on the way in which the students felt their race was perceived. Teacher Teagues discussed the use of conversational discipline rather than exclusionary discipline and its impact on the students. Conversational discipline is used to foster meaningful dialog around a particular topic or issue in a way that helps bring clarity and resolution without fear of punishment, retaliation, or damage (Bolton, 1998).

> Teacher Teagues: But if a kid that I have this conversational discipline with, let's say, they don't do the assignment that I'm asking them to do, but when we get to the next unit and we're having a class discussion, this kid is talking, they want to share their opinion, they want to write down their thoughts.
>
> Teacher Teagues: They haven't given up, they're still trying, and there is something that we have to figure out. They come up to me and just say, "Hey, Teacher Teagues, and it's Monday. Just because I wanted to say hi to you." It lets me know that the kid wants

> to be there. "If you keep putting me out, I'm not going to come back." You don't... So, I don't.

Teacher Teagues talked about the need for teachers to explore proactive understandings surrounding discipline. Teacher Teagues leveraged strong student–teacher relationships, open communication, and individualized support to re-engage students in course material rather than simply punishing them for facing challenges in the learning process. Through preventative non-punitive discipline practices, teachers were able to disrupt school-to-prison nexuses through resistance to exclusionary punitive practices around discipline.

All in all, when African-American students were situated within a learning environment that resisted school-to-prison nexus indicators and utilized preventative, proactive, and non-exclusionary strategies in tandem with student behavior, it had a positive impact on the ways in which they felt they were regarded. The students who felt they were perceived, treated, and supported in a positive manner (by the school, teacher, and/or peers) had higher levels of public regard and ultimately face minimal issues surrounding discipline.

Private Regard

Private regard, otherwise defined as African-American students' feelings and beliefs surrounding their race, ethnicity, and/or intersectional identity, was positively impacted when classroom environments welcomed strengths-based narratives surrounding African-American identity and when teachers utilized counter-stereotypical content about African Americans.

Critical Strengths-Based Narratives Centering African-American Identity

In addition to centrality and public regard, strengths-based narratives about African

Americans also had a positive impact on how African Americans were perceived. Critical strengths-based narratives about African-American identity impacted the ways in which African-American students felt their race and/or intersectional identities were perceived by non-African Americans. When asked if learning about their history made them feel proud, all students answered yes.

> Interviewer: When it comes to learning these diverse forms of history or even talking about Black history, is this something you see in your other classes or is this something you feel you particularly see in this class?

When asked about the class content and activities, some students said the following:

> Gladys: It made me really surprised because I didn't even know what they did and to just sit back and be, "Wow, no one told me about this." I was just clueless about this no one wanted... It's almost as if no one wanted to tell me. They tried to hide that stuff, but it's really interesting, and I kind of feel proud to learn about our history.

Strengths-based narratives provided empowering content that challenged the dominant, deficient, and/or invisible narratives surrounding Black history content that African-American students were used to experiencing. Gladys mentioned the intentionality behind the subordination of content in teaching about empowering narratives. Regarding African-American history identity, it's important to note that data was collected at the height of the anti-CRT movement, when content and curriculum providing strengths-based narratives about African Americans who resisted racial inequity were being banned. The students talked about gaining access to empowering racial counter narratives and its positive impact on how they perceived themselves. When the students were able to see empowering depictions of folks from their community, it had a positive impact on the ways in which they perceived their identity and their overall sense of belonging in school.

Counter Stereotypical Content

Counter stereotypical content about African Americans had a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students perceived their identity. Gladys explained how content about enslavement was often centered within her experiences of the school curriculum when discussing African-American history. Counter stereotypical content impacted the ways in which African-American students felt their race and/or intersectional identities were perceived by non-African Americans.

African-American students felt that learning about enslavement was important but should not be the sole narrative when learning about the complexities of African-American identity and history.

> Gladys: I feel I definitely see myself in the curriculum. Other than the Black part, from just talking about slaves, more how Black people actually are influences cultures across America. So I like to see that from a different perspective.

For the students, content and discussions detailing the counter stereotypical experiences of African Americans and marginalized communities at large often had a positive impact on how African-American students perceived their own identity. This is further confirmed by Student Marvin:

> Marvin: Oh, I guess it does in a sort of way. Because you learn more about it than what you... You learn new stuff. So stuff you didn't know before and it changes your way, the way you see them."

Marvin's private regard was positively impacted when he learned about diverse, counter-stereotypical, and empowering stories about the African-American experience. The positive counter-stereotypical impact on African-American students' private regard is connected to the recognition and validation of their intersectional racial identities, which the students reported to be minimized, stereotyped, problematized, and/or deduced within the school curriculum

(Ladson-Billings, 1994; Harper, 2007; Milner, 2012). When the students were able to see themselves in complex, nuanced, counter stereotypical ways, it had a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students perceived themselves.

Sense of Community

Sense of community, defined as a shared faith that members' needs will be met and advocated for through a commitment to one another, was fostered through a supportive classroom environment, strong student-to-student relationships, an equity-based school culture, equity-minded African-American community partners, college-going cultures, and wrap-around services.

Supportive Classroom Environment

A supportive learning environment is defined as a community of individuals who come together with a shared purpose of learning and growing, which provides a safe and equitable learning environment to collaborate, engage in feedback, and provide critical reflection (Cohen, 2019; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Supportive learning environments were shown to have a positive impact on African American students' sense of community or shared faith that their academic learning community would meet their academic needs. For example, Gladys did not experience backlash, hostility, or aggression when wanting to explore political content (not to be confused with partisan), which is defined as the power relationship between individuals in society as it pertains to the study of U.S. history (McAdam, 1999).

Interviewer: What is it about this class that you all enjoy most?

Gladys: I enjoy how comfortable I can be with just talking about even really political

topics that can be related to US history.

Perceptions of a supportive classroom environment were confirmed by Mingus.

> Interviewer: Do you all feel comfortable sharing personal experiences in class discussions or when you're just chopping it up on the side?
>
> Luther: I feel like we can be trusted and keep it in that class.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah? What about you?
>
> Mingus: I agree with that.

Students such as Luther and Mingus felt that they were situated within an environment where their academic needs, for example, confidentiality and trust, would be met. This includes a desire to explore social justice content or a trusting environment for students to express vulnerability.

The students reported that there is a positive sense of community within the class and positive connections in the learning environments.

Strong Student-to-Student Relationships

Positive student-to-student relationships had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community. Strong student relationships had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community. The students continually mentioned how the classroom community, particularly the student-to-student interactions surrounding the content of the course, was one of the things they enjoyed the most about the course. This is demonstrated by Student Etta below:

> Interviewer: You like that? Getting to know one another as a person—that was important. Interesting. What about anyone else, anything in the lesson plans, or like what she mentioned, just relationship-wise or peer-wise?

Etta: I liked getting closer to some people.

Fela: Yeah.

The students began smiling and talking about how the course content and a sense of community fostered within the structure of the classroom facilitated student relationships.

Interviewer: Wow. So you all didn't really know each other before the end of it? I would've never known that. You two vibed a little bit, but for the most part...

Chaka: Basically, our schedules are like, you got to get to know everybody all over again.

Interviewer: That's cool. And do you think the course content helped you all get to know each other, the way the class is set up and run?

Fela: Yeah.

All African-American students: Nodding Yes and or saying yes outloud

The students' appreciation for building relationships with one another in the classroom demonstrated fulfillment of the students' social and emotional needs in the educational setting. The students further elaborated on their appreciation for other students in the learning community.

Mingus: It feels like a family in class.

Interviewer: Feels like a family, yes?

Mingus: Yeah. We just know each other very well.

Interviewer: Was there something that you all learned in class that you really enjoyed?

Etta: I feel like getting to know one another, just like people.

The students expressing appreciation for positive community as their favorite part of their educational experience highlighted the importance of recognizing and meeting African-American students' social needs, regarding it as an essential component of effective teaching and learning.

Strong student–student relationships help cultivate a positive sense of community. An environment where students felt comfortable sharing information and connecting with others helped support student wellbeing and belonging in the course.

Equity-Based School Culture

Having a classroom culture rooted in intersectional equity helped foster a positive sense of community among students. Supportive learning environments were shown to support students' cultural, social, and academic needs. The students talked about the school context as supportive of intersectional conversations about race and racism. When asked about their comfort levels with these conversations, student Ray further explained:

> Ray: I feel that I talk about it [race and identity] so much with my family, friends, and all around the school. It's just another topic to talk about, and I feel fine talking about it.

Ray's positive experiences surrounding critical discussions of race and identity, both inside and outside of the school environment, created an educational setting where he felt safe discussing these topics. This dominant pattern was shared by additional students in the classroom. Chaka noted how a school environment and culture rooted in intersectional anti-racism supported her overall sense of community.

> Chaka: Speaking for me personally, yes, but only at this school. Because, like Fela was saying, how she was lucky how this school is kind of open with certain topics like that [race, injustice, and identity], I have been able to have conversations with other teachers, where we did discuss things like that. Not only in school with other students, I feel like it's a very kind of judgment free type of zone so we're free to express our opinions in how we can and there's not really a fear of like, "OMG, they're going to hate my opinion, especially among the student body."

A culture of social justice and anti-racism created a space for Ray and Chaka to discuss and learn about issues of anti-racism, equity, and/or social justice without the fear of backlash

from their peers. A classroom rooted in a culture of equity and anti-racism provided African-American students the opportunity to explore critical content surrounding race and identity without fear of retaliation or reprisal.

Ultimately, creating a classroom environment that prioritizes social justice and anti-racism helped students meet a wide range of academic and social needs, which led to a richer learning environment.

Equity-Minded African-American Community Partners and College-Going Culture

Teachers' cultivation of a college-going culture helped foster a positive sense of community. Teachers utilized community partners to help foster a college-going culture within the classroom. Their commitment to fostering a college-going culture demonstrated a commitment to supporting students' needs for professional development outside of the course content. Teacher Tolson at Sankofa High talked about fostering a college-going culture through a field trip where the students visited the local university.

> Teacher Tolson: We went to Freedom University and spoke with some advisors and student groups who talked about their experiences getting into college as Black and Brown folks and provided advice from the students. We have also had some successful alumni, for example, NFL players who also went to Sankofa High, speak with students about going to college.

Field trips to the local four-year college demonstrated teachers' commitment to supporting students' academic, personal, and professional development. The cultivation of a college-going culture demonstrated that teachers shared a commitment to supporting students' current and future needs both inside and outside of the course.

Wrap-Around Services

Teachers' access to and utilization of wrap-around services helped foster a positive sense of community. Wrap-around services helped meet the needs of students, that is, foster a sense of community, with support mechanisms outside of the school curriculum. While conducting a class observation, Teacher Tolson talked to both me and the teacher's aide, discussing the importance of wrap-around mental health services for students.

> Teacher Tolson: Our school is fortunate because we have funding for wrap-around services, like mental health counselors, that are key to supporting students' persistence in the classroom. Without these services, teachers were trying to provide every form of support, and it wasn't as effective in supporting students.
>
> Teacher aid: Was she able to access the services alright?
>
> Teacher Tolson: Yeah, I followed up with her; she said she found them helpful. We always say, "If you want students to be successful inside of school, they have to be supported outside of school." That's from Duncan Andrade when he came, gave us some training, and helped get the course set up for pilot status when we first started.

Through Teacher Tolson's experiences of teaching and supporting students of color, including African-American students, having wrap-around services was crucial to supporting and meeting student needs that existed outside of the classroom. This support and commitment to student needs outside of the classroom had a positive impact on their sense of belonging (or sense of community) inside the classroom.

How Does Race Factor into Belonging for African-American Students?

This question explored factors surrounding students' race that positively impacted belonging indicators for African-American students. Belonging indicators that were impacted include centrality, private regard, public regard, and a sense of community. Classroom communities that fostered critical intersectional racial literacy, critical strengths-based narratives surrounding race and African-American identity, and content that challenged deficit narratives

about African Americans had a positive impact on how African Americans conceptualized themselves, their future, and what they/we are capable of (self-concept). When understanding how race factors into belonging for African-American students, having a critical mass of equity-minded African-American students and critical strengths-based narratives surrounding African Americans' race and identity had a positive impact on African-American students' public regard. Critical strengths-based narratives centering on African-American identity and critical cross-racial narratives about solidarity had a positive impact on African-American students' regard for themselves. When understanding how race factored into building a sense of community for African-American students, critical intersectional African-American experiential knowledge, a school culture rooted in intersectional racial equity, and the retention of African-American students and teachers helped meet the academic and social needs of African-American students (sense of community).

Centrality

Classroom communities that fostered critical intersectional racial literacy, critical strengths-based narratives surrounding race and African-American identity, and content that challenged deficit narratives about African Americans had a positive impact on how African Americans conceptualized themselves, their future, and what they/we are capable of.

Critical Intersectional Racial Literacy

Critical racial literacy is a skill set used to identify and resist structural or interpersonal forms of racism (Twine, 1999; Gunier, 2004). Intersectional refers to intersectionality and acknowledges the multiple forms of subordination that intersect with race (Crenshaw, 1989;

Crenshaw, 1991). Critical intersectional racial consciousness relates to Freire's (1970) critical consciousness, that is, the ability to identify and disrupt inequity; however, it differs in that it has a specification for issues surrounding, centering, and/or intersecting with race. Critical intersectional racial literacy had a positive impact on supporting African-American students' self-concept and fostering environments of belonging for all aspects of African-American identity. Teacher Tolson developed the students' critical intersectional race consciousness. Teacher Tolson first developed their general understanding of various forms of inequity that intersect with their racialized experiences.

Students learned about various ideologies and how various systems of inequity marginalize various communities. Teacher Tolson gives an assignment, specifically a worksheet with terminology featuring a variety of isms and definitions students need to learn and memorize for their upcoming assessment. Teacher Tolson then went over the definitions of some of the terms with students.

> Teacher Tolson: He says when we talk about things like racism and sexism, what are we talking about?

The teacher asked the class, but the class did not respond, and the teacher said that sexism and patriarchy are built and interwoven into systemic racism.

> Teacher Tolson: We can look at the word wo-man or fe-male. Moreover, the idea that women come from men, can't exist without us, and are therefore inferior—what are we referring to?
>
> Students: Is that sexism?
>
> Teacher Tolson: Sexism and patriarchy, yes.

Teacher Tolson provided additional examples of -isms and additional inequities of systemic inequities. Teacher Tolson offered various examples of how sexism and patriarchy

unfairly impact and marginalize women. He talked about why it is important to question dominant gender norms, which are deemed “normal,” that marginalize women, especially women of color. The teacher talked about homophobia and the marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ community. The teacher at Sankofa High provided a definition of antisemitism and how it is at the core of understanding white supremacy. Teacher Tolson then offered several historical and contemporary examples of antisemitism. The students discussed the implications of the Holocaust earlier throughout the quarter, as well as contemporary antisemitism and the connection between the two. One example is the discussion of modern corporations that participated in and profited from the Holocaust but have yet to return earnings to survivors, take accountability, or repair the harm being caused.

Teacher Tolson also provided a definition of classism and related crime to issues of classism. Below is an example:

> Teacher Tolson: Why do people commit crime?
>
> All students remained silent.
>
> Teacher Tolson: Think about it: Why do you think most people commit crimes?
> Students: Because they don’t have something, or need something?
>
> Teacher Tolson: Often, most crimes or people that are in jail are in there for non-violent offenses that are often related to lack of access to resources.

Teacher Tolson’s development of students’ critical intersectional race consciousness involved exploring topics as continual subject threads that were ongoingly discussed throughout the course or connected to the course content, rather than simply a brief one-time discussion. Teacher Tolson explained how all these -isms are connected to white supremacy and that disrupting intersectional white supremacy is important for all student communities. This is connected to shaping students’ self-concept, as it instills the importance of future decision-

making skills to not instill, reproduce, or reify various forms of discrimination. It is important to note that there were many more -isms and systems of inequity listed on the assignment sheet that were not reported in the observation data above.

Teacher Tolson provided definitions and real-world examples of various ideologies that intersected with race. These terms helped build a vocabulary for how to identify various forms of inequity that intersect with students' racial experiences. Student focus group data identified examples of how students resisted intersectional forms of racial inequity and the impact that had on their understanding of themselves. Critical intersectional race consciousness factors into students' ability to identify and disrupt the various inequities that intersect with race. African-American students demonstrated an ability to recognize and resist various forms of racial inequity and their impact on students' self-concept.

> Interviewer: Do you feel like having these conversations about race and racism helps you navigate when you do have issues like race or that are not right? That it helps you identify it and understand that it's something that's problematic?
>
> All African-American students: Yeah. Yeah.

The students further elaborated on their responses.

> Interviewer: Do you feel like that helps you kind of understand yourself in life in general?
>
> All African-American students: Yeah. Yeah.

Gladys further elaborated by discussing the importance of why schools need to provide education that fosters an intersectional and critical understanding, alongside her own resistance against racial inequity.

> Gladys: Of course, I think that they should talk about it more so that all these kids don't

> go out of high school and they just don't even know what they're talking about. And they're getting all this hate. And they're like, "What, why are you guys talking to me like that?" I don't understand because they weren't taught some of the things that need to be taught about racism.

Gladys explained the ways she herself experienced and resisted racism. She elaborated on how these personal experiences of discrimination shed light on the institutional need for education about race, racism, and its many intersections of inequity, as a proactive strategy to buffer against the embedded forms of anti-Blackness (both interpersonal anti-Black racial bias and systemic anti-Blackness such deficit centered narratives) and its many intersections (patriarchy, ableism, classism, Islamophobia, etc.) to support the full humanity of all African-American children.

Developing a critical intersectional race consciousness helped students develop a vocabulary of what intersectional racial inequity could look like such that it could be actively disrupted. All African-American students agreed that having the skillset to identify and resist various forms of racial inequity had a positive impact on the ways African-American students conceptualized and understood themselves and the world at large. The ability to identify and resist various forms of racial discrimination helped buffer and disrupt the internalization of racist, anti-Black, harmful, and/or problematic beliefs held by students outside of the learning community.

Critical Strengths-Based Narratives Surrounding Race and African-American Identity

The use of critical strengths-based narratives surrounding race and African-American identity had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept.

Student Interview Data

When examining the impact of race on belonging, I identified specific examples of how critical strengths-based narratives impacted the way African-American students perceived themselves and their future decision-making choices. Student Whitney and Student Aretha posited that learning strengths-based narratives about their community had a positive impact on how they perceived themselves and what they were capable of.

> Interviewer: When you're able to learn about yourself... when you learn positive stories about yourself, does that change the way you see yourself and what you can do?
>
> Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.
>
> Aretha: Yes.

Chaka explained:

> Yeah, mostly. It inspires me or gives me a kind of context for how certain things work and how they've always worked, and stuff like that… I would say that helps me because when I learn about it, I'm actually interested in it and so much interested in it that I want to talk about it and share with other people. It's really helpful to have all of this knowledge on hand just so that I can have a really genuine and honest conversation that's full of really accurate facts.

Rosetta further elaborated on the impact on her self-concept:

> It was actually very shocking. And I was like, "Oh my God, I could be the first African American, anything." I'll crush it because there aren't really in any of those. So it opened a lot of doors for me—that I could say.

When asked how they felt about the class, other students, for instance, Gladys, were more concise about their thoughts.

> Gladys: [Be]cause they tried to hide that stuff… So US history, it's really kind of a topic about white people and what they've done with all this stuff. But when you put it into AP [advanced placement] terms, it goes deeper than that. And I learn about things that I didn't even know about. And I'm like, what? These people of color did this? That's crazy. I didn't even know about So I like that I can get bigger details and information about stuff that I didn't even know about.

Student Prince further elaborated on how critical strengths-based narratives about African

Americans had a positive impact on how he perceived what he was capable of accomplishing:

> I would feel like yes, because of course it's really specific to your background... Not only did your ancestors grow up during those times, but it's just kind of seeing yourself that you're kind of able to do that as well, because you see people who look like you. If they're able to accomplish it, okay, you can accomplish something based on that feat—if not even higher than something like that. So I feel like that encourages us.

The students continually reported a "shocking" feeling upon learning that African Americans and communities of color had made large-scale positive contributions to the history and development of the U.S. African-American students having the opportunity to see individuals from their community make positive and lasting contributions to the larger social landscape had a positive impact on how they understood and conceptualized themselves.

Not only were the students grateful to learn positive stories about the contributions of their community, which many felt had been kept from them intentionally, but critical strengths-based narratives centering on race and African-American identity also had a positive impact on what the students felt they could accomplish later in life. Critical strengths-based narratives played a key role in fostering belonging for African-American students.

Challenging Deficit Narratives in Schooling

Evidence from teacher and student interview data revealed how challenging deficit narratives had a positive impact on how African-American students viewed themselves and what they were capable of in the world at large. There was intentionality behind Teacher Teagues' resistance to deficit narratives surrounding race and African-American identity. The statement below from Teacher Teagues shows how she reframed a discussion about reconstruction when teaching African-American history in her AP course from a deficit-centered lens to a strengths-based lens.

> Teacher Teagues: So, one of the biggest things in reconstruction is to look at how it failed. If we're going to teach it, including equity, then we have to say, "What are these successes of reconstruction? And why were those things created in the first place to create this level playing field or some type of reparations for free labor from Black people?"

Teacher Teagues repositioned the discussion surrounding reconstructing from a deficit-centered lens to a strengths-based lens. Student interview data demonstrate how such repositioning of African-American history had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept.

Challenging deficit narratives had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Semi-structured student interview data identified the impact (and strategies) of teachers reframing anti-Black deficit narratives embedded in the course curriculum. When asked about the inclusion of Black history in class, Student Coltrane explained how his teacher was intentional about inserting strengths-based narratives surrounding race, African Americans, and people of color.

> Interviewer: Does Teacher Teagues bring in notions of Black history?
>
> Coltrane: Yeah, all the time. All the time. Whenever we touch on a subject that's dealing with Black people, she always makes sure to include just her own side note about a situation, showing the positive [side] of what was going on during this time.

Coltrane then provided an example of how Teacher Teagues resisted a deficit narrative during the discussion of enslavement.

> Coltrane: She [Teacher Teagues] took a side note when we were talking about slavery to show how the slaves, they got away. In the curriculum, there wasn't really as much touched on about slaves, but she made sure to talk about it and explain the hymns and everything, and how the slaves would use hymns and stuff like that to plan their escape on the Underground Railroads and stuff like that.

Coltrane elaborated on Teacher Teagues' resistance against deficit narratives when speaking

about African-American history and the impact that had on his course engagement and overall self-concept.

> Coltrane: Yeah. When we're learning about other stuff, I'm not really too eager to learn about it, but when she's talking about Black people, just the way she talks about it is just really good.
>
> Interviewer: And then, when you hear these positive stories about Black folks, does that help change the way you see yourself and what you're capable of?
>
> Coltrane: Yeah.

Challenging deficit narratives impacted how Coltrane perceived himself and what he was capable of. Student Nina further explained the impact of only focusing on deficit enslavement narratives about African Americans history and their contributions to the larger society.

> Nina: And yeah, I think slavery was something really important, but I think they should also talk about more positive things that happened that we've contributed to, to give us something more positive to look up to and stuff, to know that we weren't just oppressed our whole lives, that we've done great things too.

Nina felt that focusing on deficit narratives about the African-American community when educating about African Americans sent the message to African-American students (and students at large) that African Americans did not and do not make significant contributions to society. Nina explained that when she was able to learn about positive contributions that African Americans made, it communicated not only that African-American students could achieve great things but that she also could.

Both teachers resisted the centeredness of enslavement when teaching African-American history and the deficit lens often used to portray the experiences of African Americans who were enslaved. This reframing of African-American experiences, from damage-centered to strengths-centered, had a positive impact on how African-American students perceived themselves and

what they were capable of.

Public Regard

African-American students' public regard is defined as how one believes or feels their race is perceived. When understanding how race factors into belonging for African-American students, having a critical mass of equity-minded African-American students and strengths-based narratives surrounding African-American identity had a positive impact on how African-American students felt they were perceived.

Critical Mass of African-American Students

Having a diverse school community with a critical mass of African-American students and students of color helped demonstrate the ways in which race factored into student belonging. A diverse school community had a positive impact on the ways in which African Americans felt their race and/or intersectional identity were perceived. The students discussed how having a critical mass of African-American students helped buffer against negative perceptions of their race and identity.

> Interviewer: Okay, and then, school-wise, how do you feel like Black kids are treated in school?
>
> Curtis: Pretty good, because this school is very diverse. It's mainly African-American and Mexican kids. So I feel like we get treated equally here. Instead of in other schools, [where] maybe we wouldn't be.
>
> Interviewer: And a big part of feeling that comfort, I think, is seeing the kids of color that look like you?
>
> Curtis: Yes.
>
> Interviewer: That's a big part—you don't stand out.

Curtis: Yes, it is.

When examining how race and identity factored into belonging, Curtis posited that having a critical mass of students of color, specifically African-American students and Mexican American students, had a positive impact on how students felt their race was perceived. African-American students described a feeling of not "standing out" or feeling alienated (i.e., a sense of belonging) when situated within an environment with a critical mass of African-American students. The importance of diversity in fostering a positive public regard for African-American students was further discussed in the student focus groups.

> Interviewer: Can you ever think of a time when you were at school and you felt like maybe your race was a problem?
>
> Students began to shake their heads left to right, communicating no.

Student Etta agreed and further explained.

> Etta: Because this school is diverse, I don't really worry about race problems.
> Interviewer: So, that makes a big difference, then (demographics)?
>
> Etta: Yeah.
>
> All students nodded their heads in agreement.

Student Etta acknowledged that having a diverse school community and a critical mass of African-American students helped buffer against negative perceptions of her race. All the students in the study agreed that having a critical mass of African-American students, within a diverse school context, helped reduce feelings of hypervisibility, racial alienation, and/or otherness. When factoring in the role of race into belonging, school environments with a critical mass of African-American students had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of belonging.

Strengths-Based Narratives Centering African-American Identity

Alongside centrality and private regard, critical strengths-based narratives about African American students' race and identity also had a positive impact on how African-American students felt they were perceived by non-African Americans. Critical strengths-based narratives and an anti-racist classroom culture helped foster positive perceptions, that is, public regard, of African-American students' race and identity. Chaka felt the class, which focused on strengths-based content for African-American students, had a positive impact on the way she was perceived.

> Chaka: I would kind of think that the class kind of helps me shape or kind of helps me understand how others see me.

Student Rosetta elaborated on Chaka's comment, offering an example of how non-African American students began treating African-American students differently after being exposed to strengths-based content about African Americans and the contributions they have made to society.

> Interviewer: When there's moments where there's positively different views from the class, do you feel that impacts the way that you're treated by the class?
>
> Rosetta: I think it does because they're like, "Okay, this is what you have done for us. Let us not praise you. Let us make you feel like, 'Thank you.'" Like one of my friends… the topic, it was about a historical Black woman, and my friend was like, "She did that?" I'm like, "Yeah." I remember, after that, she treated every Black person differently. I'm like, "Why are you being different?" And she was like, "Because what I learned is very shocking. And I'm happy I learned that." And I was like, "Yeah."

Rosetta detailed how a non-African American student's public regard shifted in favor of African Americans after being exposed to the strengths-based content. The non-African student themselves explained to Rosetta that the reasoning behind the change in their behavior toward

African-American students was a result of being exposed to the critical strengths-based content about African Americans. Rosetta was surprised to see the real-time, immediate impact of critical strengths-based content about African Americans on non-African-American students. Rosetta revealed that the non-African-American student immediately began treating African Americans with increased levels of gratitude and appreciation after learning about the positive contributions African Americans made to benefit all student communities.

Chaka and Rosetta described counternarratives as having a deeper profound impact than simply on how African-American students viewed themselves. The impact of critical strengths-based narratives also had an immediate impact on the ways in which African American students were treated.

Private Regard

Private regard indicates how African-American students perceive their own race and/or identity. The purpose of this section, as it pertains to the research question, is to explore the impact of race-based content (rooted in strengths and criticality) on African-American students' private regard. Critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity and critical cross-racial narratives about solidarity had a positive impact on African-American students' regard for themselves.

Critical Strengths-Based Narratives Centering African-American Identity

Strengths-based narratives had a positive impact not only on African-American students' centrality and their public regard but also on the ways in which African-American students perceived themselves. The students consistently reported a sense of "pride" or being "proud"

when being exposed to critical strengths-based narratives about the African-American community. Critical strengths-based narratives impacted the ways in which African-American students perceived their own racial and/or cultural identities (private regard).

> Interviewer: And would you all say that when you're learning about yourself and the curriculum, does that make you feel kind of proud to be who you are?
>
> All African-American students: Yes.

Several more students explained how and why the class had an impact on their racial identity. The students used the words "we" and "I" to relate the course material about African Americans to their own lives. Students Gladys and Jean-Michel talked about the impact of course material on how they regarded themselves and their community at large.

> Gladys: [Knowing the history] just makes me proud. It made me appreciate them more.
>
> Jean-Michel: Yeah, [it makes me proud] and thankful for what they've taught us. I think if we never had that class, we never would've learned it.
>
> Gladys: I kind of feel proud to learn about our history.

All African-American students reported a feeling of pride after being exposed to strengths-based narratives about their community. Earlier data explored the saturation of deficit-centered narratives and ultimately the lack of empowering narratives when speaking about African American experiences. African American students' views of themselves and their community were positively impacted after being exposed to critical strengths-based narratives about African-Americans.

Cross-Racial Solidarity with African Americans

Strengths-based narratives about communities that demonstrated cross-racial solidarity

with African Americans in resisting racial inequity had a positive impact on African-American students' regard for themselves. Cross-racial solidarity with and for the African-American community impacted the ways in which African American students perceived their own racial and/or cultural identities (private regard). The students reflected on some of their favorite moments of the class and discussed the impact of solidarity on their self-concept.

> Interviewer: Is there a specific lesson or moment that you really liked about the course?
>
> Tina: All the movies he showed us about how, like the Black Panthers and then the Brown Berets, they were connected Malcolm X.
>
> Interviewer: But that made you feel positive, though?
>
> Tina: Yeah.

The students discussed how critical forms of media demonstrating historical forms of solidarity between African-American and Latinx communities had a positive impact on how African-American students perceived themselves. Narratives centered on cross-racial solidarity with African Americans validate the significance of African-American social justice movements and demonstrate how these movements benefit not only African Americans but the world at large. This inspired a sense of pride and empowerment among students.

Sense of Community

A sense of community refers to a shared commitment between group members to meet the needs of one another. Understanding how race factors into meeting the needs of African-American students, critical intersectional African-American experiential knowledge, a school culture rooted in intersectional racial equity, and the retention of a critical mass of African-American students helped meet the academic and social needs of African-American students.

Critical Intersectional African-American Experiences

Teacher Teagues' and Teacher Tolson's intersectional experiences as African Americans helped provide real-world experiences surrounding race and gender that African-American students found helpful in meeting their need to further understand their identities and how that impacts their schooling experiences.

Student Interviews

The student interview data revealed how real-world African-American experiences of intersectional understandings of race, identity, and power helped support African-American students' needs and foster a positive sense of community in them. Chaka found it helpful to have conversations about her intersectional identity as an African-American woman.

> Chaka: So when we're in there, we get to have intimate discussions about our experiences being black at school and outside of school. And I was able to hear some of the things that she had to say and relate to them through my own terms of experience. So it's things like that. And then her also being a woman, stuff like that.

Chaka was able to relate information about Teacher Teagues' experiences as an African-American girl to her own experiences, which she found helpful in gaining insights about herself and her experiences inside and outside school. African-American experiences rooted in the real-world intersectional understanding of race enhanced the learning environment for African-American students. These experiences met students' needs by helping them gain a deeper understanding of their identities, such as race and gender, and how their identities may be shaped, supported, impacted, and/or minoritized within educational contexts.

Equity-Based School Culture

African American students were situated within schools that fostered a school culture welcoming toward practices and conversations about intersectional forms of equity and supported the needs (i.e., sense of community) of African-American students. An equity-based school culture impacted the ways in which African American students perceived their own racial and/or cultural identities (private regard). The students reported how a school-wide culture welcoming conversations about race and its many intersections had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community.

> Interviewer: Do you talk about these topics of say like, identity, like you said, or marginalization or privilege and oppression and gender and race and sexuality, are these things that you talk about in classes outside of this course?
>
> Chaka: Speaking for me, personally, yes, but only at this school. Because like Fela was saying, how she was lucky how this school is kind of open with certain topics like that, I have been able to have conversations with other teachers where we did discuss things like that. Not only just in school with other students, I feel like it's a very kind of judgment free type of zone so we're free to express our opinions in how we can and there's not really a fear of like, "OMG, they're going to hate my opinion." Especially, among the student body. So yeah, I have had conversations like that outside of this class. Because sometimes it just comes up.

The students described feeling "lucky" or feelings of gratitude to be situated within a schooling environment that welcomed critical conversations about topics such as equity, marginalization, race, gender, and sexuality. Chaka discussed the need to discuss topics centering race, equity, and/or students' intersectional identities, as these topics intersected with students' daily lives both inside and outside of school. Students Chaka and Monk further detailed how their teachers, both inside and outside her courses, and the students within the larger community were welcoming of these conversations.

> Chaka: So yeah, I have had conversations like that [about race] outside of this class. Because sometimes it just comes up.

Monk: I was going to agree with, Chaka. As far as... With my experience, even with this class, after school hours talking to Teacher Teagues or talking to other teachers, like she said, it will dwindle in and we'll just bring up like I'm going over work and then, that would just pop up and then we'll just talk about it freely.

Teacher Teagues worked directly with students to help them understand and develop critical understandings of race, equity, and identity, which helped foster a welcoming classroom.

Challenging Anti-Black Deficit Narratives Embedded in the Social Context

When understanding how race factored into supporting African-American students' needs, teachers challenged anti-Black and low-income stereotypes by affirming students' racial identity through strengths-based counter messaging. Teacher and school resistance against deficit-centered anti-Blackness embedded in the larger social context helped support and meet the needs of African-American students.

A conversation between the teacher's aide, Teacher Tolson, and a student revealed how teachers actively disrupted anti-Black low-income stereotypes embedded in the larger context within which their high school was situated.

Teacher aid: Have you heard seen all the news drama about the upcoming game. The football coach had such a good response, he helped to dispel a lot of stereotypes about our school.

Teacher Tolson: Sort of, I haven't been following but I've been hearing about it.

The teacher's aide turned to me and provided historical context about deficit-centered stereotypes impacting beliefs around their high school. This sparked up a brief conversation as kids were coming into class, waiting for the bell to ring with Teacher Tolson, the teacher's aid, and myself in the corner of the classroom by the teacher's desk.

Teacher aid: To give you some context about our school and the media. They always

> write articles using racial and low-income stereotypes that are not true or reference to things that happened 5–10 years ago.
>
> Interviewer: What types of stereotypes do they use?
>
> Teacher aid: The news and other schools refer to our kids as “gang members,” “animals’ who need to have a “collar” around their neck, and/or “convicts” who will break into your car.
>
> Teacher aid: The football team our school was supposed to play said some [anti-Black] slurs about our players online. And you won’t believe this… they tried to make our school pay for security for them to play at our home field because of their racist beliefs about Black people.

Teacher Tolson and the teacher’s aide then talked about how the stereotypes surrounding their school were inaccurate.

> Teacher Tolson: They think our school is all Black because our football team is mostly Black, so most slurs are anti-Black stereotypes. There are actually more Mexican students than African Americans at this school. And there hasn’t been any break-in or crime from our side during a game that we can remember.
>
> Teacher’s aid: You think diversity would be celebrated, but then again, the stereotypical comments often come from predominantly white schools or reporters who are not from the local area.

The teacher’s aide discussed with the teacher, a student, and me about how teachers aim to disrupt the anti-Black deficit narratives.

> Teacher aid: The news outlets reinforce all the racism by only reporting the negative about our school that happened ages ago and none of the positive ways that we support our students or about the diversity at our school being positive.
>
> Teacher Tolson: A lot of times those narratives are projected onto our teachers and overall school not being “good.” No one talks about any positive aspect about the school, which is typical of the media’s relationship with low-income Black and Brown schools.
>
> Teacher aid: So because of that, we always try to make everyone here, especially the football team, who are mostly African American, know they are loved and valued and that they mean the world to our school.
>
> Student: Yeah, we always talk to each other—the football team too—about how much

we love the diversity at our school.

Teacher's aid: We've made t-shirts with positive messages countering things said in the media and constantly remind them they are valued… stuff like that.

The teacher's aid, the African-American student, and Teacher Tolson all explained how their student community bonded and worked together to resist anti-Blackness that intersected with perceptions about their school.

Affirming African-American students' racial identity helped meet the needs of African-American students by responding to and buffering against the anti-Black marginalization taking place in the larger social context, which intersected with students' schooling experiences. All in all, creating environments that welcomed and actively affirmed critical surrounding students' intersectional racial identities helped meet the social and academic needs of African-American students and, therefore, create a positive sense of community.

Retaining a Critical Mass of African-American Students

Retaining a critical mass of African-American students, or failure to do so, had an impact on supporting African-American students' needs and sense of community. Failure to retain African-American students has a potentially negative impact on retaining a strong sense of community for African-American students. Teacher Tolson explained how retention of African-American students and their critical mass in the student population has been difficult due to institutional mechanisms such as bussing that sends African-American students to schools different than the ones situated in their African-American community.

Teacher Tolson: So you may wonder why the percentage from Sankofa dropped from being mainly all-African-American from back in the day.

Teacher Tolson: Most African-American students in the local neighborhoods are bussed

to what they believe are better schools that lack the diversity and African-American representation used to protect kids from racism.

Interviewer: Do you know if those kids are successful at those schools? Or what their experiences are like?

Teacher Tolson further elaborated on the impact of bussing on students and their sense of community back at Sankofa High.

Teacher Tolson: Yeah, what happens to most of those kids is that they are often resegregated within their newer schools, while our school and the African-American community is further drained of their talents. Their parents have heard so many bad things about school that they would rather have them at a segregated school with no direct support around their identity than send them to our school. The school district is paying to bus kids from our school, [which] also sends the problematic message to our community that our Black and Brown schools are no good and offer nothing positive to our students.

Teacher Tolson: We always tell the school district or on any feedback channel that we take the money from bussing, which is super expensive, and [they] allow us to re-invest into our schools directly for things [such as] professional development, more course options, etc.

Teacher Tolson detailed how bussing students out of African-American schools into predominantly non-African-American schools reinforced deficit perceptions of their school, which negatively impacted their ability to retain remaining African-American students.

Difficulties in retaining a critical mass of African-American students resulted in a lack of support and community for both African-American students who were bussed out of Sankofa High and African-American students at Sankofa High. A critical mass of African-American students, supported by equity-minded African-American teachers, helped foster a supportive environment where African-American students' cultural experiences are valued, supported, and understood. When understanding how race factors into supporting belonging for African-American students, a lack of retention in supporting the critical mass of African Americans fails to support the cultural, social, collective, and academic needs of African-American students.

How Do African-American Teachers Cultivate Belongingness for African-American Students?

This question specifically explored what practices African-American teachers employed to positively impact African-American students' belonging indicators. It is interested in identifying the teaching practices that supported and/or shaped African-American students' self-concept, public regard, and sense of community. African-American teachers had a positive impact on African-American students' centrality through high expectations paired with high support, authentic care, strong student–teacher relationships, critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity, structural resistance to inequity and anti-Blackness, and modeling advocacy surrounding general issues of equity. Public regard for African-American students was positively impacted when African-American teachers utilized counter narratives and critical strengths-based content about African-American identity. Teachers who utilized critical strengths-based content about African-American identity had a positive impact on African-American students' private regard. African-American teachers supported and met the social and academic needs (i.e., sense of community) of African-American students through non-punitive multimodal grading practices, creating access to advanced placement (AP) courses, advanced training, intersectional African-American experiences, and promotion and advocacy for African-American students at the leadership level.

Centrality

African-American teachers had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept, otherwise known as centrality, through high expectations paired with high support,

authentic care, strong student–teacher relationships, critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity, structural resistance to inequity and anti-Blackness, and modeling advocacy surrounding general issues of equity.

High Expectations Paired with High Support

African-American teachers demonstrated high expectations paired with high levels of support, which had a positive impact on African-American students' centrality. Teachers in this study pushed students to achieve their very best while creating multiple learning opportunities for students. High expectations paired with high levels of support had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Student Marvin expressed that he felt that his teacher pushed him academically to reach his highest potential.

> [Teacher Teagues] is always there to help me; she's always there to push me to make sure I'm doing better or to overdo better cause she's trying to make sure we all know how to do what we can and stuff like that. So she pushes me and stuff like that. So all around, I would say we have a good, you know... yeah.

The high level of support paired with high expectations was also indicated by Nina:

> Nina: Teacher Tolson wants us to do the best that we can, so he's giving us every chance to [be successful].

Teachers not only provided multiple opportunities to be successful at the course content but, according to students, also genuinely and actively supported them in achieving that success.

African-American teachers' pairing of high expectations with high levels of support not only supported student learning but also transformed African-American students' understanding of their very own academic capabilities. Marvin and Nina mentioned a dominant pattern where African-American students recognized that their teacher was invested in supporting their learning and overall success, which ultimately transformed what they believed they were

capable of in class.

Authentic Care

Authentic care is defined as supporting students as a whole individual and their many unique intersections; this includes supporting students both inside and outside the classroom (Valenzuela, 1999). African-American teachers' demonstration of authentic care had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Equity-minded African-American teachers' authentic care of students had a positive impact on their overall self-concept. The students felt that African-American teachers showed they authentically cared for and were invested in their success; the students reciprocated this care for their teacher.

> Interviewer: Would you recommend [Teacher Tolson]?
>
> Nina: I would because he's very informative. He might talk a lot, but it's very informative, and he does assignments and projects that are not ordinary. So he gets you to really understand it, and his class is fun because he's a fun person and he's funny.
>
> Whitney: And I would too, because he's not a regular teacher. It doesn't seem like he's just doing this because it's his job. But he actually cares.

The students continually recommended their teachers and felt that their teachers genuinely wanted to support them both inside and outside of the classroom. Students Nina, Whitney, and Aretha talked about why they believed their teacher authentically cared for them.

> Nina: He wants us to do the best that we can, so he's giving us every chance to.
> Interviewer: Not just in this class, but in life in general too, right?
>
> Whitney: Yes. Aretha: Exactly.
>
> Whitney: He's not a regular teacher. It doesn't seem like he's just doing this because it's his job. But he actually cares.

The students felt their teachers supported them to be successful not only in their

classroom but also in life. This demonstrated a positive impact on students' sense of community, or belief that one will be supported in a way that meets their needs within a learning environment.

Critical Strengths-based Narratives Centering African-American Identity

African-American teachers intentionally employed critical strengths-based narratives centering African-American identity; this included discussions surrounding anti-Blackness. Teachers' intentionality in including these strengths-based narratives had a positive impact on African-American students' centrality. The students felt that teachers were intentional in the inclusion of strengths-based content centering on African-American identity.

> Interviewer: And do you feel like your teacher [Teacher Tolson] and maybe even other teachers in the school, do you feel like they're intentional about trying to include things like diversity, make sure everybody in the class can be seen and learn about their history?
>
> Fela: Yeah, he does.
>
> Etta: Yes.

Tina further elaborates on the impact of critical strengths-based narratives on her self-concept.

> Interviewer: Yeah. And then, for like for Black folks, do you all get to learn like Black history and things like that?
>
> African-American students collectively said, "Yeah."
>
> Tina: He [Teacher Tolson] makes me feel more comfortable to be me. You know what I mean? Like accepting the fact that I'm going to be Black.
>
> Interviewer: Does that make you feel empowered?
>
> Tina: Yeah.

African-American teachers' intentional use of critical strengths-based strategies made

Tina feel comfortable about being an African American. This demonstrated a positive shift in Tina's current and future conceptualization of herself and her capabilities as an African American. African-American teachers' intentional inclusion of critical strengths-based narratives had a positive impact on African Americans' feelings, experiences, present conceptualizations, and navigation of their future as African-American students. Teachers intentionally included strengths-based content that centered on African-American identity. Teacher Teagues talked about her intentionality in centering content that represents the diversity of the larger context within which her students are situated.

> Teacher Teagues: What I try to do is make sure our content looks like our kids. So, when we're talking about equity… it does take some challenging the traditional lens that history has been taught, you have to challenge that because when we study reconstruction for example, it's funny that reconstruction is taught as a failure. So, one of the biggest things in reconstruction is to look at how it failed. If we're going to teach it, including equity, then we have to say, "What are these successes of reconstruction? And why were those things created in the first place to create this level playing field or some type of reparations for free labor from Black people?"

Teacher Teagues demonstrated the positive impact of the intentionality of centering critical strengths-based narratives about African Americans on African-American students' self-concept. Her teachers' discussion and curriculum surrounding Black history not only instilled pride in being African American but also empowered her identity.

Teachers were intentional about ensuring that African-American students felt seen and reflected in the curriculum and course content, which positively impacted students' self-concept. The students continually reported feeling empowered after equity-minded teachers shared critical strengths-based narratives about African-American identity. Empowerment is defined as the ability to take action, make decisions, or have agency over one's own life and circumstances (Mirriam-Webster, 2023; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, critical

strengths-based narratives about African Americans, provided by African-American teachers, helped transform her self-concept, in that she felt she had more agency over her life, and equipped her to deal with potential future issues that may arise from being African American after being exposed to the content.

Structural Resistance to inequity and anti-Blackness

Resisting inequity on a structural level had a positive impact on African-American students' centrality. Teacher Teagues addressed anti-Blackness within the school curriculum with her students, discussing the limited representation of African Americans and Black people in the context of a U.S. history course. Teacher Teagues talked about the impact of incorporating resistance to anti-Blackness through structural mechanisms such as the school curriculum.

> Teacher Teagues: Our kids will engage, period. They get to talk about themselves… In my history class, I was like, "Where are the Black people?" One thing is that it gives them an opportunity to talk about it [race] because, well, let me say it this way: You don't foster community if these things exist in the world and you avoid them. Because what that says is, first of all, when you go into a classroom and you have the teacher who is the authority seeker, if that person is not brave enough to bring this to the table, then why should I be brave enough to bring it to the table? That's not my responsibility, and how do I engage in that conversation? You don't foster community when these topics are avoided because you don't give the opportunity for conversations with bravery or perspectives and to learn other people's experiences as well.

This was further elaborated in the student interviews, where all students agreed the school and district should have an ethical responsibility to resist anti-Blackness at the structural level and teach empowering, nuanced narratives about African Americans.

> Interviewer: Is there anything else you feel like it should be the district's responsibility that the school should talk about more?

> Nina: I think they should also talk about more positive things that happened that we've [African Americans and Black people] contributed to, to give us something more positive to look up to and stuff, to know that we weren't just oppressed our whole lives, that we've done great things too.

Nina detailed how the limited and stereotypical representation of African Americans in the curriculum failed to present empowering African-American examples, representations, or models that could help African-American students envision their own capabilities. This evidence represented a dominant recurring trend, where all participants in the study felt it was the district's and school's responsibility to teach critical, empowering narratives about African Americans and Black people. Structural resistance and education about anti-Blackness were seen as ethical responsibilities of schools to protect students (and teachers) against embedded forms of structural inequity (i.e., lack of empowering representation within the curriculum) that African-American students experience. Data from Teacher Teagues and Student Nina demonstrated that, without critical, empowering narratives, African-American students' self-concept may be marginalized, limited, or harmed.

Modeling Advocacy

Teachers who modeled advocacy for marginalized student communities had a positive impact on how African-American students conceptualized their capabilities as advocates.

African-American teachers modeling advocacy for marginalized students' communities had a positive influence on students' centrality. Teacher Teagues discussed how modeling advocacy helped open the door to students' understanding of their own capabilities in engaging in advocacy and conversations about equity and identity.

> Teacher Teagues: It starts with you. I mean, as the leader of the classroom, I think sometimes we bypass, and sometimes teachers think it's not about them. It's not about

me, but also, the kids are focused on me.

> Teacher Teagues: Especially with some of these topics [equity and identity]and especially in the climate that we're in, when you're constantly worried about who's going to judge what I'm saying, who's going to take what I'm saying in the wrong way, or maybe I don't say it well and it sounds bad, Why would I start off the conversation immediately without somebody else opening the door for me and setting the example of what that vulnerability can look like and how people can respond to that type of vulnerability?
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. That's part of that is that modeling too, right?
>
> Teacher Teagues: Oh, exactly. It really opens the floodgate and as I'm sitting here thinking about it, I'm thinking about just the pedagogy that they all go through in our undergrad programs and the modeling and stuff like that. It's going to influence my relationship with each student and their relationship with each other or because they know if they can trust me and also, they're watching their peers trust me. Then they feel an embedded trust with each other.

Teacher Teagues elaborated on the positive impact that modeling advocacy had on facilitating a sense of community within the classroom.

> Teacher Teagues: Now, when these conversations are had or had the fact that you brought them to the table and you know that this is happening in the world, it's important because it tells our kids that we are not trying to avoid this. It's kind of like they have a desire to do these things, and the thing about that is it shows them how you can have this kind of discourse, academic, social, whatever it is, you can have this kind of discourse and really be able to state how you feel. Because a lot of times, especially for Black students in one way or the other, they get the message that you shouldn't say that.

Teacher Teagues explained how African-American teachers modeled in real-time what advocating for equity, race, and identity looked like. Role modeling and advocacy around issues of equity had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Role modeling helped demonstrate to African-American students how to acknowledge and navigate critical conversations, academic discourse, and life experiences surrounding intersectional issues of race and social inequity.

Public Regard

Public regard refers to the way African Americans' race and/or identity are perceived by non-African Americans. Public regard for African-American students was positively impacted when African-American teachers utilized counter narratives and critical strengths-based content about African-American identity.

Counter Narratives and Stories

Counter stories had a positive impact on the ways in which African-American students felt their race and identity were perceived. Counter narratives, also known as counter stories, involve sharing experiences and perspectives that are often overlooked or silenced by dominant Western culture and offer alternative strengths-based viewpoints that challenge problematic mainstream ideology. Counter stories can be used to challenge myths and stereotypes that may impact the learning environment and to promote social justice and equity in the classroom. Marvin detailed how counter narratives help to transform perceptions about the African-American community.

> Interviewer: So when you learn African-American history, does that change the way that you see that community? When you learn about like Latinx folks, contributions that they've made, does that change the way that you see that community or not go for it?
>
> Marvin: Oh, I guess it does in a sort of way. Because you learn more about it than what you... You learn new stuff. So stuff you didn't know before and it changes your way, the way you see them.

The interview with Marvin revealed a dominant trend where counter stories about the contributions of African Americans serve as a powerful tool to challenge the commonly centered deficit narratives when speaking about African Americans. Counter stories provided

new information that nuanced and ultimately transformed students' understanding of the ways in which they felt African Americans were perceived.

Private Regard

Private regard, or the ways in which African-American students perceive themselves, was positively impacted when African-American teachers utilized critical strengths-based content about African Americans.

Critical Strengths-based content about African-American Identity

African-American teachers in the study included critical strengths-based conversations about race and how African-American students felt they were perceived. African-American teachers utilized critical strengths-based narratives to have a positive impact on African-American students' perceptions of themselves. The students discussed the impact of critical strengths-based narratives on their perceptions of themselves.

> Interviewer: Did you find that those conversations [about African Americans and racial equity] helped you out later in life?
>
> All African-American students: Yeah.
>
> Luther: It just makes me proud.
>
> Mingus: Knowing who I am, what I'm mixed with. So, yeah.
>
> Luther: It made me appreciate them more.
>
> Interviewer: It made you appreciate them?
>
> All African-American students: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: You appreciate those conversations?

Students: Yeah.

Mingus: Thankful for what they've taught us.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Jean-Michel: Because I think if we never had that class, we never would've learned.

African-American students knew that critical strengths-based narratives about African-American identity were helpful in supporting students' identities. Students such as Jean-Michel also knew that these helpful, critical strengths-based narratives about African Americans were being subordinated in schooling. Due to the positive impact on their development, students such as Gladys were grateful to learn these stories.

> Gladys: Cause they tried to hide that stuff but it's really interesting and I kind of feel proud to learn about our history.

Gladys detailed that critical strengths-based content about African Americans not only had a positive impact on the ways in which students perceived themselves but also helped students developed a deeper connection and sense of appreciation for their teachers.

As mentioned earlier, data collection took place at the peak of the banning of critical social justice content (Sawchuck, 2021). Students were aware that empowering narratives and stories about racially marginalized communities were being banned across the country, and they were grateful to learn critical educational content about their community and history. The students felt that the inclusion of race-based social justice content helped them take pride in their identity.

Sense of Community

A sense of community (an indicator of general belonging) is defined as a shared faith

that members' needs will be met and advocated for through commitment to one another. African-American teachers supported and met the social and academic needs of African-American students through non-punitive multimodal grading practices, creating access to AP courses, advanced training, intersectional African-American experiences, and promotion and advocacy for African-American students at the leadership level.

Non-Punitive Multimodal Grading Practices

Non-punitive multimodal grading practices were found to be helpful in meeting the academic needs of African-American students. Non-punitive discipline practices fostered a sense of community for African-American students. Teachers were invested in student learning and provided multiple modes and opportunities for students to submit assignments. Teachers were invested in students' learning the material, providing multiple avenues for feedback, assessment, and learning (for example, allowing resubmitting assignments) and meeting the learning objectives by the end of the course rather than punishing students with lower grades for experiencing growing pains (this may include errors and mistakes in content) or challenges in the learning process. The students commented on how teachers provided empathy and understanding while also providing multiple avenues for assessment to allow for student growth and competence in course material. Student Coltrane provided an example of non-punitive grading practices:

> She gives us multiple opportunities to submit assignments. If you have something going on, she listens.

Coltrane further elaborated:

> She just does really nice stuff like that. She's always just asking, "Oh, how's your grade?" and stuff like that. Like, "You want to come back and do some assignments?"

She's always just very helpful teacher. I like Teacher Teagues a lot.

Teacher Teagues offered multiple opportunities for students such as Coltrane to learn and be assessed for their overall competence in coursework when the students experienced barriers or challenges to completing their assignments. Teachers held the students to high expectations surrounding student learning while also creating multiple opportunities for students to submit assignment and learn content. Teachers prioritize the overall goal of students reaching the learning objectives of the course. Rather than punishing the students for their behavior surrounding test preparation, teachers provided multiple modes and channels for learning and assessment to ensure that the students had every opportunity to be academically successful.

Access to AP Courses

Creating access to AP courses had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community. Creating access to AP courses for African Americans communicated to students that they would be included and supported. Teacher Teagues acknowledged the existence of a historical and institutional invisibility when supporting the academic needs of African-American students.

> Teacher Teagues: How can I continue to create access to [AP courses]? How can I keep that going? But it also means, in the classroom, there's a certain invisibility when it comes to the academic side of Black students. And understanding that helps me to say, I know I need to make sure you're seen, and how can I also let you know that you are seen? So, thinking like that, in my experience, helps me understand how kids show up in my class.

Teacher Teagues discussed the historical lack of access for African-American students to AP courses.

> Teacher Teagues: I understand, for example, especially when you look at some academically rigorous courses, like an AP class. I understand the lack of access that traditionally has been for Black students.

By creating access, Teacher Teagues wanted to ensure that African-American students received a message that may not have been communicated to them: that they are seen as equally deserving of being in AP courses.

Teacher Teagues' intention of creating a pipeline for African-American students to gain access to AP courses helped support the academic needs of African-American students who may not have gained access to the course if it was not for their teacher. This demonstrates a sense of community where the members of the learning community, that is, their teacher, hold a shared commitment to supporting students in having equal access to rigorous course content.

Advanced Training and Intersectional African-American Experiences

Advanced training in areas such as race, education, and social justice paired with experiential knowledge in the African-American community had a positive impact on teachers' ability to identify and meet the needs of their students while enhancing the learning environment. Both teachers held a master's degree in education, attended development conferences, and were also equity-minded African Americans who are active in the local African-American communities within which their schools were situated. Teacher Tolson was raised in the same local African-American community that his students were from, attended the same high school he taught at, and also had a master's degree. He developed extensive relationships with the local school community that allowed him to better understand how to support the needs of his students.

Teacher Tolson's is talking with a student who just walked into the classroom and says,

> "I just bought a few of your mom's new products this weekend!" Teacher Tolson explains to a few students and the teacher's aide that Aretha and Nina's parents own a local business that he supports. He further explains that he was raised in the local community, attended the local high school, and knew a lot of his students' families and parents.

Teachers Tolson's relationship with the local African-American community provided an additional avenue outside of school content to connect with and learn about the students. By building a strong relationship with the local African-American community, Teacher Tolson fostered a sense of community in his classroom that went beyond academic learning.

Both teachers' experiential knowledge of their local African-American community (that their students were situated within) allowed them to understand how to support students in ways that existed both inside and outside of the classroom. By acknowledging, relating to, and supporting the lived experiences of their students, these teachers demonstrated a commitment to supporting students' needs holistically.

> Teacher Tolson is talking to the teacher's aide and a student at the beginning of class about attending a recent conference.
>
> Teacher Tolson: Yeah, I had a chance to attend a conference. I wasn't sure at first, but it was actually helpful seeing all the different things going with ethnics studies. It was nice to hear the appreciation for our content and to get new ideas also.

Teacher Tolson's proactive choice to attend a professional development conference demonstrated his commitment to improving the learning environment for his students. This dedication to continual improvement exhibited a shared faith that members of the learning community are dedicated to maintaining and improving support for students' academic needs within the classroom.

Teachers who receive advanced training in areas such as race, education, and social justice, coupled with experiential knowledge of the African-American community,

demonstrated improved abilities to identify and address the unique needs of their students. By bridging theory and practice, these teachers are better equipped to navigate racial dynamics, promote equity, and meet the needs of African-American students.

Promotion and Advocacy Within Positions of Leadership

An African-American teacher's promotion to a leadership position resulted in an increased sense of community (i.e., belonging) for African-American students within the larger school context. An African-American teacher pursued a leadership position within the school to help respond to the schooling needs of African-American students. Teachers promoting and advocating for African-American students at the leadership level supported a sense of belonging. Teacher Teagues was offered a leadership position within the school not only due to her exceptional performance and high ratings but also because of her expertise in creating structural support for African-American students and supporting equity for the student body at large. Teacher Teagues and her African-American teacher's aide were talking excitedly as the students were working in groups. The teacher's aide then approached me and asked:

Teacher's aide: Have you thought about teacher promotion?

Interviewer: No, I didn't; that sounds exciting! Did you all just find out?

Teacher aid: We found out earlier, but we have been explaining to students that Teacher Teagues will not be teaching as many classes to make space for her new leadership role.

After class, I approached Teacher Tolson to congratulate her, and she explained some of the reasoning behind her decision to take the promotion.

Interviewer: Congratulations!

> After congratulating Teacher Teagues, she explains that one of her primary motivations for accepting the position was to help advocate for marginalized students, particularly African-American students who had been feeling less supported in the school. As Teacher Teagues returned to helping students the classroom, the teacher's aide turned to me and provided a recent example explaining how African-American students reported to her and Teacher Teagues that a non-African-American student was using the N word repeatedly, and Teacher Teagues held the student accountable and helped to provide awareness surrounding policy forbidding anti-Black language.

Teacher Teagues as an administrator actively resisted anti-Black language. Her leadership position afforded her the opportunity to shift institutional policy, resist anti-Blackness within the classroom and at the institutional level, and create a more welcoming environment for African-American students. Teacher Teagues advocating for African-American student needs at the teacher level and through leadership demonstrated a shared faith that the members' needs within a learning community will be met and advocated for. Teacher Teagues demonstrated a commitment to creating a learning environment that is responsive to the specific needs of African-American students (and all of her students at large).

How Does African-American Teachers' Intersectional Racial Identity Influence the Pedagogy of African-American Teachers?

The intersectional identities of African-American teachers factored into pedagogical choices that positively supported African-American belonging. African-American teachers' critical racial identity impacted two primary indicators: centrality and sense of community. African-American students' centrality was positively impacted when equity minded African-American teachers' racial identity provided navigational capital that guided mentorship and enhanced expertise about social justice content. When understanding how teachers' racial identity factor into creating a sense of community, teachers' positioning, critical awareness, and student support helped foster curricular counter spaces that helped meet the needs of African-

American students.

Centrality

Centrality, or the impact of race on self-concept, was positively impacted by knowledge and experiences stemming from African-American teachers' intersectional racial identities. Equity-minded African-American teachers' racial identity provided navigation and mentorship, and enhanced expertise around social justice content impacting African-American experiences had a positive impact on how African-American students understood themselves and what they were capable of.

Navigational Capital and Mentorship

Navigational capital refers to the cultural knowledge and skills that individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds use to navigate and succeed in larger, inequitable social and institutional landscapes (Yosso, 2005). Critical African-American mentorship is rooted within a shared identity and designed to provide support, guidance, and advocacy to African-American students within the larger U.S. institution of education has largely been shown to be historically anti-Black and rooted in intersectional white supremacy ideology (Linnehan, 2001; Mitchell & Steward, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). This study confirms a large body of research that demonstrates the positive impact of African-American mentorship on African-American students. When understanding how teachers' racial identity factored into student belonging, African-American teachers' intersectional racial identity helped provide navigational capital and guide mentorship for African-American students. Equity-minded African-American teachers' personal experiences, navigational capital, and mentorship had a positive impact on African-American students' future decision-making choices and overall self-concept. Teacher Teagues'

experiences as an African-American woman provided helpful information for African-American students in navigating experiences surrounding race and gender both inside and outside of school. This was indicated by Chaka in her interview:

> Chaka: She is also one of the advisors for the Black Student Union Club that we have. So when we're in there, we get to have intimate discussions about our experiences being Black at school and outside of school. And I was able to hear some of the things that she had to say and relate to them in my own terms of experience. So it's things like that. And then her also being a woman, stuff like that.

As an advisor, Teacher Teagues was able to provide mentorship, answer student questions, and provide advice to students on how to navigate being African American, Black, and a woman in the world at large. Although Teacher Tolson was not an African-American woman, Teacher Tolson was still able to provide information that Marvin found helpful in navigating race.

> Marvin: He [Teacher Tolson] makes me feel more comfortable to be me. You know what I mean? Like accepting the fact that I'm going to be Black.
>
> Interviewer: Does that make you feel empowered?
>
> Marvin: Yeah.

Marvin expressed that his teacher helped him feel empowered about what it means to be African American. Empowerment is defined as the process of enabling individuals or groups to have agency within their lives through informed and proactive choices to achieve their life goals (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Feeling empowered, Marvin demonstrated a transformation in how he conceptualized herself and what he was capable of, which had a positive impact on his self-concept.

The students felt that Teacher Tolson's experiences as an African American helped him understand the importance of connecting students with intersectional content that helps them

navigate their future as African Americans.

> Interviewer: Do you think your teacher's experience as a Black person helped inform the course?
>
> Whitney: I think he understands what we are going to go through in the future, as far as gender and race. How women of color are probably going to be at the bottom is going to be the hardest for us because of our race and gender. It's not going to be easy and stuff.
>
> Nina: I agree.
>
> Interviewer: So yeah. So he talks... And do you feel like your teacher's able to help facilitate the way that you critically think about things so that you are able to make smarter choices about your future, specifically because of race and gender?
>
> Aretha: Yes.
>
> Nina: Yeah.

Teacher Tolson's intentional use of curriculum that connects students' intersectional racial identities to the course content directly supported the needs of African-American students by helping them reconceptualize their future decision-making choices pertaining to race and gender. The students reported that both teachers were able to relate and provide helpful information that stemmed from shared experiences between teachers and the students. This information helped the students understand how to navigate the larger social and educational context as African Americans.

Enhanced Expertise about Social Justice Content and African-American Experiences

Student and teacher interview data revealed that equity-minded African-American teachers' intersectional racial experiences had a positive impact on how students conceptualized themselves and what they were capable of. Teachers' intersectional racial identities had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community. Student interview data

helped identify the ways in which teachers' intersectional identities enhanced the learning of social justice content and helped support the needs of African-American students. Student Ray felt that Teacher Teagues' personal experiences as an equity-minded African-American woman provided additional expertise that helped enrich learning of the social justice content.

> Interviewer: Okay. Cool. And then lastly, when it comes to teaching about these issues such as race or identity or gender, do you think her experiences as a Black woman helps to guide those conversations, or do you think it might not matter?
>
> Ray: I feel it really does because I feel that she's been in that world before. So, I feel she can relate to us more about that topic, especially that certain topic.

Teacher Teagues' intersectional experiences surrounding race, gender, and African-American identity helped provide additional experiences that created welcoming environments for African-American students to relate, connect, and/or understand intersectional issues surrounding equity and identity. Student Monk further elaborated on the welcoming environment his teachers had created for African-American students to explore their intersectional racial identities.

> Monk: I was going to agree with Chaka. As far as... With my experience, even with this class, after school hours, talking to Teacher Teagues or talking to other teachers, like she said, it will dwindle in, and we'll just bring up like I'm going over work, and then that would just pop up, and then we'll just talk about it freely.
>
> Interviewer: That's cool.
>
> Monk: It wasn't like an argument. It was just like a casual conversation.
>
> Interviewer: Right. So talking about identity and equity, it seems like the space naturally welcomes it. Does that sound what you all are saying?
>
> Monk: Yeah.
>
> All students nodded, indicating yes.

African-American students felt that Teacher Teagues' intersectional racial identity

helped create an environment where students could reflect on concepts such as race, gender, and general social inequity, and the ways these issues intersected with their life experiences and overall self-concept. The enrichment of student learning surrounding topics such as equity and identity through experiential knowledge was also mentioned in the teacher interviews.

Once students had related and connected to the material, leading and facilitating conversations about race and social justice helped students conceptualize what conversations surrounding race, equity, and identity looked like. By modeling what these conversations looked like, students were able to apply knowledge within their own context.

Teacher Teagues' experiences as an African-American woman helped to foster student learning and guide conversations when discussing intersectional social justice content about topics such as equity, race, and gender.

> Teacher Teagues: It starts with you. I mean, as the leader of the classroom, I think sometimes we bypass, and sometimes teachers think it's not about them. It's not about me, but also, the kids are focused on me.
>
> Teacher Teagues: Especially with some of these topics [race and identity] and especially in the climate that we're in, when you're constantly worried about who's going to judge what I'm saying, who's going to take what I'm saying in the wrong way or maybe I don't say it well and it sounds bad, why would I start off the conversation immediately without somebody else opening the door for me and setting the example of what that vulnerability can look like and how people can respond to that type of vulnerability?
>
> Teacher Teagues:
>
> It really opens the floodgate and as I'm sitting here thinking about it, I'm thinking about just the pedagogy that they all go through in our undergrad programs and the modeling and stuff like that. It's going to influence my relationship with each student and their relationship with each other or because they know if they can trust me and also, they're watching their peers trust me. Then they feel an embedded trust with each other.

Teacher Teagues created an environment that welcomed African-American students in the exploration of their intersectional identities. Additionally, Teacher Teagues also modeled

linguistic choices that are non-defensive, non-punitive, and welcoming toward conversations surrounding equity, identity, and social justice. Teacher Teagues' reflection on her own racial identity and welcoming of student interaction and questions helped model to students' what conversations around social justice could look. This is significant, as the larger anti-CRT climate within students' larger social context demonstrated a punitive and hostile response to many African-American scholars, educators, and community members who explored issues of social injustice (Sawchuck, 2021).

A shift in students' self-concept was demonstrated in the non-defensive linguistic choices they made when navigating issues of identity and equity within the student community. The linguistic choices mirrored the vulnerability of their teacher when exploring issues of equity and identity. Teachers' expressions of critical racial identities helped enhance social justice content, which impacted how students conceptualized their future. Teachers Tolson's intersectional experiences surrounding race—having a white mother and an African-American father—informed his understanding of how race is often unitarily positioned in communities.

> Teacher Tolson: So how is race projected onto us? How is it multidimensional?
>
> My mom is white, and my dad is Black. I'm actually mixed, but the world sees me as a Black man and I'm also treated as such.
>
> Teacher Tolson: My kid is Black, Latino, and white, but the Black part isn't always celebrated.
>
> Teacher Tolson: The reason we learn about our history is to understand challenges that come from the past, like racism and sexism, that impact our future

Teacher Tolson talked about how, although he had a white mother and an African-American father, the world treated and saw him as a Black man. This helped to inspire Teacher Tolson to learn about race and its many intersections, how race was unique as a visual construct

that is placed externally upon individuals (systemically, coconsciously, and unconsciously), and how it explained the way African-American communities (and himself) were treated and positioned in society. This conceptualization of future choices and challenges demonstrated an impact on students' self-concept. This connects to the student interview data, where students reported that Teacher Tolson helped them prepare for future aspects of marginalization that would intersect with their identities.

Sense of Community

A sense of community is defined as a shared commitment to meeting the needs of group members within an academic setting. When understanding how teachers' racial identity factor into creating a sense of community, teachers' positioning, critical awareness, and student support helped foster curricular counter spaces that had a positive sense of community for African-American students.

Intersectional African-American Experiences and Critical Awareness and Support

Teachers' positioning helped foster awareness of student needs, which ultimately informed the ways in which they supported and met the needs of their African-American students. The positioning of the equity-minded African-American teachers in this study had a positive impact on a sense of community for African-American students.

African-American teachers' positioning had a positive impact on the ways in which they supported and met the needs of their African-American students. Monk was adamant about providing a positive recommendation for Teacher Teagues. He felt that Teacher Teagues'

positioning as an African-American woman helped foster a critical sense of awareness in knowing, understanding, and meeting the needs of her African-American students.

> Interviewer: Would you all recommend Teacher Teagues?
>
> Monk: Most definitely. Because she's so understanding and that she can bring her own experiences to the table when you're talking to her.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think her life experiences, let's say as a Black woman, bring that in the classroom? Do you think that helps?
>
> Monk: Yeah. For the most part, it does help all the time. She understands—let's say you had something going on the other day and you couldn't turn an assignment in, she understands what you're going through, especially during the pandemic.

Although Monk was not an African-American woman, he found that his teacher's experiential knowledge as an equity-minded African-American was helpful in his understanding of his schooling experience as an African-American student.

Teacher Teagues' positioning and experiences as an equity-minded African-American woman provided a nuanced approach toward education that helped Gladys, an African-American girl, relate to the course content in ways that differed from her instructors, who were not African-American women.

> Interviewer: Do you feel like Teacher Teagues, her experience as a woman of color, as a Black woman, that helps to relate to certain experiences and certain topics in class? Do you feel like that's a thing that helps you relate to her?
>
> Gladys: I feel like it does. Because, in my opinion, I feel like Black women are one of the bottom people on the food chain. I feel like they don't get enough credit and they're not as protected as they should be. So I think it is really important, and it's really nice to hear certain things that [Teacher Teagues] talks about to which a white person would talk about... It's different, I feel like it's more important to hear stuff from her.

Gladys acknowledged the systemic marginalization of African-American women in the larger social landscape (and within the field of education) and how that might reify the lack of

diverse voices and experiences that students need to gain a nuanced understanding of the world.

The students continually expressed how having African-American women teachers with nuanced experiences that reflect the identities of the students in the classroom was effective in supporting and meeting their cultural and academic needs. Teacher Teagues' positionality helped inform her understanding and intentionality in supporting and meeting the needs of her African-American students.

> Teacher Teagues: So, what was interesting is I always categorize myself the same way; normally I say it out loud, but as I was thinking about some pointers I wanted to make, I wrote it down. So, I identify as a poor Black woman from Mississippi, and writing that down felt interesting for me, but I identify that way because, really, you look at different groups and how those groups shape your identity and what that experience is like. It allows me to be accessible to my students. I understand in a very deep way some of their experiences, and it helps me build that relationship with them. So, when you talk about being a Black student, my experience as a Black person shapes and informs how I interact with Black students. And that's really important for me because… I understand the lack of access that traditionally has been for Black students.

Teacher Teagues' epistemologies (both personal and academic) and experiential knowledge as an equity-minded African-American woman and educator informed how she interacted with and supported her African-American students.

Teacher Teagues understood the many ways African-American students are marginalized in the education system, one of which is an unequal lack of access to resources. Teacher Teagues' intentionality toward being accessible to her African-American students refers to her intention of ensuring that African-American students have equal access to resources, opportunities, and services that are necessary to thrive in her classroom setting. It also reflected her vulnerability about her intersection of marginalization and her understanding of how those intersections may align with her students, thereby creating a sense of commonality and shared identity. This intent toward supporting identifying and supporting student needs,

across their many intersections of identity, demonstrated a sense of community, or a shared faith in ensuring students' needs are met and supported.

Fostering Curricular Counter Spaces

As defined earlier, counter spaces are defined as spaces where intersectional forms of racial inequity and systemic marginalization at large can be challenged to create a more positive racial and equitable climate (Solorzano et. al, 2000). These spaces can include curricular content, the class itself (i.e., ethnic studies), individual relationships, or any space that involves the disruption of social inequities, while supporting the identities and educational experiences of marginalized communities. Student and teacher interview data showed how both teachers used their intersectional racial identities to create and/or foster curricular counter spaces that helped foster a positive sense of community for African-American students. The students demonstrated a desire to explore their identity within school.

> Interviewer: Why is it [talking about race] so helpful to you as a student?
>
> Nina: Because we usually don't talk about ourselves like this in other classes. So to see how much we've accomplished and how great we could be doing, that helps a lot with us trying to see our positive future.

The creation of academic curricular counter spaces was effective in helping Nina meet her academic and personal needs and gain strengths-based knowledge about the African-American community. Students such as Monk and Gladys further discussed how they feel Teacher Teagues' intersectional racial identity influenced her in fostering and creating curricular counter spaces.

> Interviewer: Do you think that her experiences as just being a Black woman on a daily basis helps her be able to speak to content about both black folks and experiences of

> people of color?… Do you feel [because of] understanding…that Teacher Teagues is intentional, about interjecting stories about or topics about black folks or communities of color into the history story that in a way that you haven't had in other history classes with, say, non-Black teachers.
>
> Monk: Yeah. She'll bring it up in a way, like what I was talking about earlier, how, in a world war, something might have happened within the black community.

Glady helped to further explain:

> Oh yeah, of course. I think it's very helpful to hear some of these things come from her instead of a white male teacher talking about it. Because I know that she can relate to some of the topics that she's talking about, whether it be racism, sexism, or whatever it is. She can actually put her heart and her soul into it. And I kind of get that through her teaching. So I think it's really important that we learn from Black women like her.

Additionally, Teacher Teagues created a curricular counter space within her AP course. She discussed bans against critical content that fosters education about equity and identity and how that helped meet the needs of her African-American students.

> Teacher Teagues: Let's talk about the voting laws and voting restrictions that are being passed across the United States in 2020 and 2021, so if we look at that voter registration from the sixties, and we juxtaposed that to some of the voting registration laws or restrictions that are being placed now, can we make a prediction about how this is going to disadvantage Black communities? Can we draw a conclusion that, "Hey, these are very purposeful. Let's look at where these laws are being played."
>
> Teacher Teagues: When you turn on the news, you see this, when you hear this in your community, it's all going to come full circle with you and it just makes more sense as you're studying the information and you can engage more. We're very purposeful about bringing that kind of contemporary lens into the study of history and so that we understand what has happened and continues to happen.

Teacher Teagues' discussion of educational bans against critical content about race and identity helped students understand the harmful, systemic, and repetitive nature of systemic oppression through the lens of AP history. Teacher Teagues' intersectional experiences surrounding equity informed her of the importance of providing content that addressed contemporary issues of marginalization impacting her African-American students.

> Teacher Teagues: Back to my experience as a poor Black woman from Mississippi. When we teach history, we have to talk about equity because we have to talk about why things were created to undo some of the inequitable practices that were in history, and that gives us an opportunity to have a conversation on what those inequitable practices stem from. So, it's everywhere, it's all up and through history. What I try to do is make sure our content looks like our kids… So, when you've explored the curriculum and you definitely understand the areas where black kids are missing from the curriculum, then you debunk the idea of picking up the curriculum and going forth with it. And therefore, you're purposeful in what you do.

Teacher Teagues intentionally created counter spaces within the standard AP course curriculum to provide content that helped students identify the current issues of systemic racism and anti-Blackness. These curricular counter spaces disrupted the colorblind, apolitical-dominant ideology embedded within the curriculum.

The students discussed their enjoyment of, need, and desire to engage in topics surrounding themselves, equity, and identity. Her inclusion of content that addressed how issues of equity are currently impacting African-American students' lives helped meet the academic needs of students who wanted to engage with such content. Overall, teachers' alignment of their intersectional identities with African-American student experiences was helpful in identifying and meeting the needs of their African-American students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and African-American Belonging

Ample research has documented the connection between culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, and belonging and positive student outcomes (Brooms, 2019; Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Pak, 2018; Borck, 2020; Wiggan et al.,

2016). The purpose of this section is to briefly understand the ways in which it factored into belonging within the context of this study and impacted the four research questions guiding this study.

CRP is supported and aligned with African-American belonging indicators. According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), CRP's three primary pillars are cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success. Cultural competence is defined as a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable teachers to work effectively with students in cross-cultural situations (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2008). Critical consciousness is a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows participants to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), and academic success is defined as evidence of student learning. CRP was used to foster belonging mainly at the interpersonal level (i.e., between teachers and students); however, critical consciousness had a structural impact that supported African-American belonging. Race-based content helped build a bridge between cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success to support belonging. The three pillars of CRP are aligned with individual and multiple indicators of belonging (as defined in this study), which include racial centrality, public regard, private regard, and a sense of community.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is defined as a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable students and teachers to work effectively in cross-cultural environments (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2008). It had a positive impact on African-American students' centrality.

Centrality

Centrality is defined as the impact of race on students' self-concept. Cultural

competence had an impact on the way students perceived themselves and their confidence in what they were capable of in terms of navigating conversations about race and identity. Navigating these critical conversations helped foster cultural competence and ultimately shape students' self-concept.

Navigating Critical Conversations about Race and Identity

African-American students and teachers' cultural competence had a positive impact on supporting centrality and an overall sense of belonging of students. Critical cultural competence provided students and teachers with the skillset needed to navigate conversations about the ways in which power, identity, and structural injustice impacted their daily lives.

Cultural competence gave students confidence in their ability to share their skillset or helpful information about navigating and identifying various forms of social inequity that impacted students and their communities. It inspired students' future decision-making to share information about how various forms of inequity impacted them and their community at large. It also helped instill pride in students, impacting their understanding of themselves while providing them with a skillset to navigate future structural barriers to equity. Some African-American students discussed the following:

> Interviewer: For sure. And do you think when you're having more conversations about, say, race and class, that helps to deepen your understandings and helps to contribute to the conversations you might have with your friends and your family?
>
> Ray: Yeah.
>
> Nina: Yes.
>
> Aretha: Especially my friends. I tell them about the stuff we learn here, and they're so interested because, after school, I used to go to... They still go there because it's a high school too. And they were saying they didn't know a lot of the stuff that was happening.

> Interviewer: Okay. So it does help you navigate these conversations, and you're able to provide knowledge that is even helpful to your friends and your community, it seems like.
>
> Whitney: Right.
>
> Ray: Right.

Students Whitney and Nina talked about how cultural competence helped them prepare and navigate embedded barriers surrounding identity within an environment where students felt supported in exploring such content.

> Whitney: I think he understands what we are going to go through in the future, as far as gender and race. How… [it's] going to be the hardest for us because of our race and gender? It's [the future] not going to be easy and stuff.
>
> Nina: I agree.
>
> Interviewer: Alright. And then, as a classroom community, when you all talk about these things, like race or racism, does it feel uncomfortable, or does it feel like a supportive kind of environment?
>
> Fela: Supportive. Yeah, yeah
>
> All students: Supportive.

Students Fela and Etta elaborated on how having these conversations and gaining competence in both race and identity and social inequities impacted the ways they perceived themselves and the future choices they were capable of making.

> Interviewer: And then, when you're able to learn about your own community, how does that make you feel? When you learn about these empowering things that you're able to see yourself in, or that there's someone that you can connect to, that you relate to, how does that make you feel about the class? Or at least connecting to it?
>
> Fela: It makes me feel like I should join them. It makes me feel strong.
>
> Etta: Yeah. We can all [people of all races] get together and be like... How few years ago how, what they were doing [referring to Black and Brown solidarity in the 1960s].

As Fela and Etta learned about the inequities that impacted their community and the larger social landscape, they felt pride in the contributions their community had made to resist social inequity (for example, the Black Panthers and Brown Berets) and also wanted to make future choices to build solidarity and collective resistance toward social inequity.

The students' use of this skillset to navigate critical conversations about race and identity not only impacted the very linguistic choices students and teachers made to navigate conversations about race and identity but also aided in providing information that was deemed helpful to the individual or community with which students and teachers interacted. The positive impact of these conversations shaped the way students saw themselves and how they would navigate future conversations and decisions surrounding identity. This demonstrated an impact on self-concept as it demonstrated confidence in what students felt they were capable of or the impact they felt they would or may have in having future conversations or personal involvement in areas surrounding equity, identity, and structural injustice.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness had a positive impact on African-American students' perceptions of themselves, their community, and their future decision-making choices (centrality). Critical consciousness, an awareness and resistance against inequitable power structures (racism, classism, patriarchy, antisemitism ableism, homophobia, Islamophobia, etc.) that impact student experiences supported African-American students' centrality.

Centrality

Critical consciousness, or the ability to recognize and disrupt various forms of social

inequities, had a positive impact on how African-American students conceptualized what they were capable of. The students' intentional intersectional advocacy demonstrated a shift in their self-concept. As students were able to learn about identity and disrupt various forms of inequity in their classroom, they were then capable of doing the same in their school communities and daily lives.

Student and teacher critical consciousness helped buffer against various forms of intersectional racial inequity and white supremacy that intersected with students' lives. This ability to identify and disrupt various forms of social inequity, particularly as it pertains to African-American students, had a positive impact on their self-concept.

Rosetta provided an example of when she applied her critical consciousness to disrupt and challenge the ways in which she felt her identity was perceived.

> Rosetta: I remember one time I was with my guy friends. We're all doing lunch. We're all talking, making jokes, whatever. And this girl and her girlfriend walk past; they're holding hands jumping, I'm like, "Oh, that's so cute." I remember literally every single boy told me like, "What is wrong with you?"

Rosetta detailed the ways in which she resisted homophobia within her circle of peers outside of the course.

> Rosetta: I was like, "What?" Everyone's like, "Did you call that cute?" I was like, "Yeah, it's cute. They're a couple. They're happy." And I remember them going, "That's gross." And like, deep down. And I was like... And it hurt me more. I'm like, they don't know that I like the same gender as well. It's like, "Y'all, don't know what I am." And like I asked them, "Do you think I'm straight?" They're like, "Yeah, you're a girl." And I'm like, "Oh my God." It was like two days later in the group chats, "Hey, guys. Just so you know, I like both."

Teaching students how to identify and disrupt various forms of racial injustice helped create a positive sense of community for African-American students. Student Etta talked about the importance of teaching equity and advocacy.

> Etta: They can really learn and understand why these [racial equity movements] are important in our society and things like the past as well, how they affect today's society, and how people need to understand. Kind of just telling them right from wrong and why you need to stick up for others as well. So I feel like those are important to include in class, but yes, I have learned in other classes. Yeah.

Etta explained how the course content helped create awareness about the issues of racial injustice, how these issues impact our society, and therefore informed the ways in which students, individuals, and communities treat one another. She also shed light on the ethical responsibility we all have to learn about how to prevent harm caused by embedded forms of structural inequity. Students in general discussed the need to educate and create awareness around the need to "stick up for others as well," demonstrating a need to shift students' self-concept in terms of creating education surrounding their capabilities in standing up for marginalized communities.

Teacher Teagues intentionally modeled intersectional advocacy as a teaching tool to develop students' intersectional advocacy. Teacher Tolson elaborated on how she modeled intersectional advocacy in the classroom and the impact that had on her students' self-concept or capabilities of advocating for themselves or other students from marginalized backgrounds.

> Teacher Teagues: It starts with you. I mean, as the leader of the classroom, I think sometimes we bypass, and sometimes teachers think it's not about them. It's not about me, but also, the kids are focused on me.
>
> Teacher Teagues: Especially with some of these topics [equity and identity] and especially in the climate that we're in, when you're constantly worried about who's going to judge what I'm saying, who's going to take what I'm saying in the wrong way, or maybe I don't say it well and it sounds bad, Why would I start off the conversation immediately without somebody else opening the door for me and setting an example of what that vulnerability can look like?

Teacher Tolson further elaborated on the impact of modeling intersectional advocacy on students' self-concept.

> Teacher Teagues: Now, when these conversations are had or had the fact that you brought them to the table and you know that this is happening in the world, it's important because it tells our kids that we are not trying to avoid this. It's kind of like they have a desire to do these things, and the thing about that is it shows them how you can have this kind of discourse, academic, social, whatever it is, you can have this kind of discourse and really be able to state how you feel. Because a lot of times, especially for Black students in one way or the other, they get the message that you shouldn't say that.

Teacher Teagues explained how African-American students often embody messaging from the larger social landscape that communicates to students that talking or advocating about inequities involving their race, Blackness, and/or intersectional identity is not acceptable, taboo, or problematic. The students and teachers discussed an individual and social responsibility in disrupting various forms of inequity. When understanding the impact of race on one's understanding of what students felt they were capable of (self-concept), the students and teachers felt if students were able to learn about how to identify and disrupt various forms of racial inequity, they were then capable of doing the same in their school communities and daily lives, which is demonstrated in the statementabove. This holds connection to the first research question, which explores what belonging environments look like for African-American students. The students felt this shift in self-concept felt within themselves and their classroom could also be demonstrated at a larger or wider scale if supported institutionally.

Academic Success

Academic success, defined as evidence of student learning, had a positive impact on African-American belonging (centrality). Academic success was shown to support African-American students' self-concept when learning environments provided strong student–teacher relationships and non-punitive multimodal grading practices, content that had utility in students' lives outside of the classroom, and strengths-based content centering intersectional racial equity.

Centrality

High expectations paired with high levels of support and non-punitive grading practices had a positive impact on African-American students' student concepts, which impacted their academic success. Academic success is defined as evidence of student learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Teachers who paired strong student–teacher relationships with multimodal, non-punitive grading practices had a positive impact on African-American students' academic success and understanding of what they could accomplish academically.

Student–Teacher Relationships and Non-Punitive Multimodal Grading Practices

Strong student–teacher relationships paired with high levels of support through non-punitive grading practices had a positive impact on students' self-concept; this impact pushed students to excel in school. Teacher Teagues pushed students to conceptualize and actualize themselves as academically successful through the completion of coursework. Coursework was situated within a non-punitive multimodal lens, where teachers exercised non-punitive avenues to support learning. Strong student–teacher relationships pushed students to complete coursework within a non-punitive classroom environment while also conceptualizing themselves as academically successful.

Marvin detailed how Teacher Teagues checked in with students about their grades regularly and offered multiple avenues to support students' learning and completion of assignments.

> She just does really nice stuff like that. She's always just asking, "Oh, how's your grade?" and stuff like that. Like, "You want to come back and do some assignments?" She's always just very helpful teacher. I like Teacher Teagues a lot.

Teacher Teagues fostered a supportive relationship with students through the scaffolding of learning through non-punitive grading. She also pushed students to conceptualize and know that they too are capable of academic success.

> Interviewer: How would you describe your relationship with [Teacher Teagues] on an individual level?
>
> Marvin: I would say it's good. She is always there to help me; she's always there to push me to make sure I'm doing better or to overdo better cause she's trying to make sure we all know how to do what we can and stuff like that. So she pushes me and stuff like that. So all around, I would say we have a good, you know... yeah.

Student Marvin identifies how his teacher not only pushed him to conceptualize a successful academic future, but also provided various support mechanisms to allow students to meet the high expectations that had been set before them.

Strong student–teacher relationships supported through non-punitive grading practices had a positive impact on how students understood what they were capable of academically and on their learning, which, therefore, supported their academic success.

Sense of Community

A sense of community is referred to as a shared commitment to meeting one another's needs within a group setting. Academic success had a positive impact on African-American students' sense of community. Teachers who cultivated learning environments with curriculum that had application in students' lives outside of school and critical content about race and identity demonstrated strong academic engagement, which supported student learning.

Life Utility

The students repeatedly reported that course content helped them navigate conversations

about race and their intersectional identities outside of class.

The students desired to engage in the course content and learn material due to their utility and application in their daily lives. Two African-American students reported how the course content that directly responded to the cultural needs of their lives had a strong impact on their engagement and learning of course material.

> Interviewer: Yes. And do you feel like when we talk about these topics [race and identity] in class more, that it helps you engage more and that it helps you learn more and want to learn more, because it actually affects your life?
>
> Whitney: Oh definitely.
>
> Nina: Yeah. This is probably the class I participate the most in.

Students Whitney and Nina detailed how learning about social justice content helped meet their academic needs while inspiring them to engage in student learning. Chaka provided a more concise explanation of the utility of course content.

> Chaka: I would say that helps me because when I learn about it, I'm actually interested in it, and so much so that I want to talk about it and share it with other people. It's really helpful to have all of this knowledge on hand just so that I can have a really genuine and honest conversation that's full of really accurate facts."

Chaka discussed how learning equity-based content provided utility for both her and her community, which inspired students to engage in student learning. The utility of social justice content not only helped meet the needs of students in gaining understanding about themselves and their community but also inspired some students to want to participate in the course more so than any of their other courses.

The insertion of critical content with utility for students' lives had a positive impact on their engagement with learning and academic success. Teacher Teagues talked about how having critical content about equity that applied directly to students' communities had a positive

impact on their course engagement.

> Teacher Teagues: Our kids can actually examine those questions in a very critical way and really bring their perspective and what they've learned throughout the year into the conversation to say, "Hey, these are the areas that we have improved and we've made progress and these are the challenges that we still face." I can see these challenges happening in my community right now and these things need to be made; we need to be aware of these things. That was probably one of the assignments where it's getting a 100% participation in virtual spaces like.

Teacher Teagues discussed how students made connections between historical issues surrounding race and the current issues surrounding racial injustice that impacted them directly. Ultimately, students engaged with the learning course content that supported their needs outside (and inside) of school. They increased engagement in course content supported their overall learning, competence, and success in the course.

Critical Content Centering Equity, Race, and Identity

Critical content centering on race and identity had a positive impact on supporting student needs in understanding how to navigate intersectional issues of race and identity that intersect with their daily lives. In the focus groups, African-American students explained how they particularly enjoyed race-based content and how such content impacted their engagement and learning in the course. Fela talked about how learning about race and culture motivated him to engage in the class more, as these topics are often not discussed with students in courses outside of this course.

> Interviewer: Alright. Okay. What about this class, ethnic studies in general, what about the class do you enjoy?
>
> Fela: I like how it's more about race than a normal history class.
>
> Interviewer: Is learning about race and culture and things like… does it make you more

engaged and interested in the topic?

Prince: Yeah.

Barry: Yeah.

Fela: Yes.

Tammi: Yes.

Students Prince, Fela, Tammi, and Barry engaged in content more because it discussed critical content about race and identity. Students Jean-Michel and Gladys further elaborated on why they were engaged in race-based content.

> Jean-Michel: [it makes me proud] and thankful for what they've taught us. I think if we never had that class, we never would've learned it.
>
> Gladys: I kind of feel proud to learn about our history.

The students discussed how critical conversations and education about race have been missing from other classes they have taken. They highlighted that the class' focus on race was one of their favorite aspects of the class and instilled the feeling of pride. Critical content centering on race, equity, and identity had a positive impact on student engagement and overall student learning in the course content due to the content's direct connection to students' identities.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Belonging: Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, CRP (which includes culturally responsive and sustaining) teaching and its positive impact on belonging and African-American students are well-documented within literature (Brooms, 2019; Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). The three primary pillars of CRP—cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success—continually emerged throughout data analysis as holding connections to

all four research questions through the belonging indicators of centrality and a sense of community.

Cultural competence is defined as a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable students and teachers to work effectively in cross-cultural environments (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Navigating critical conversations about race and identity helped foster cultural competence and ultimately shape students' self-concept. This holds connections to research questions that explored what belonging looks like for African-American students, how intersectional understandings of race and culture connect to supporting belonging, and how equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belonging for African-American students.

Critical consciousness, an awareness of and disruption against inequitable power structures (racism, classism, patriarchy, antisemitism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamaphobia, etc.) that impact student experiences supported African-American students' centrality. Student and teacher advocacy, for themselves and their peers, for the support of marginalized identities and communities had a positive impact on African-American students' self-concept. Student and teacher critical consciousness shed additional light on all four research questions. This includes how critical consciousness factors into what a sense of belonging looks like for African Americans, how equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belonging for African-American students, how students' intersectional racial identifies factor into belonging, and how students' and teachers' intersectional racial identities impact belonging.

Academic success was demonstrated in a learning environment that fostered strong student–teacher relationships, non-punitive multimodal grading practices,

content that had utility in the students' lives outside of the classroom, and strengths-based content centering on intersectional racial equity had a positive impact on the students' academic success and overall understanding of what they were capable of academically. The ways teachers cultivated academic success for their students' strong relationships between teachers and peers, between students, and among the overall school community also emerged as a primary factor in supporting African-American student belonging. Strong relationships held implications for research questions that explored what belonging looked like for African-American students and how the equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belonging for African-American students.

Chapter 5: Fostering a Sense of Critical Belonging

Scant research provides a critical framework for belonging that addresses the nuances of the experiences of African-American students. Additionally, a minimal amount research addresses the institutional and interpersonal intersections of race, anti-Blackness, and belonging. Of the limited amount of research that addresses criticality in belonging, few have applied theory to practice and often do not provide specific strategies and real-world examples that explain how to foster a critical sense of belonging at the institutional level for K–12 schooling (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Beckett, 2022; DeNicolo et al., 2017; Kuttner, 2023). Similarly, this prior research addressing criticality in belonging is limited in providing specific practices for how to specifically disrupt intersectional white supremacy (for example, property of whiteness) at the institutional level. Additionally, the importance of cultural nuance in understanding belonging as a multidimensional framework, and universal assumptions in what belonging looks like both within and across marginalized continues to be a limitation in belonging research. Lastly, this research contributes a qualitative protocol, a methodology commonly missed with belonging research and criticality, to understand the stories of belonging directly from marginalized communities. This research addresses these gaps in belonging while also complicating what a critical sense of belonging can mean and look like for African Americans and marginalized communities at large.

This critical and multidimensional belonging framework is needed to identify how structural power (which is defined as but not limited to the institutional, social, political, cultural and/or contextual factors impacting belonging), and interpersonal factors (which is defined but not limited student, teacher, staff, family, or community interactions), impact belonging for African-American students.

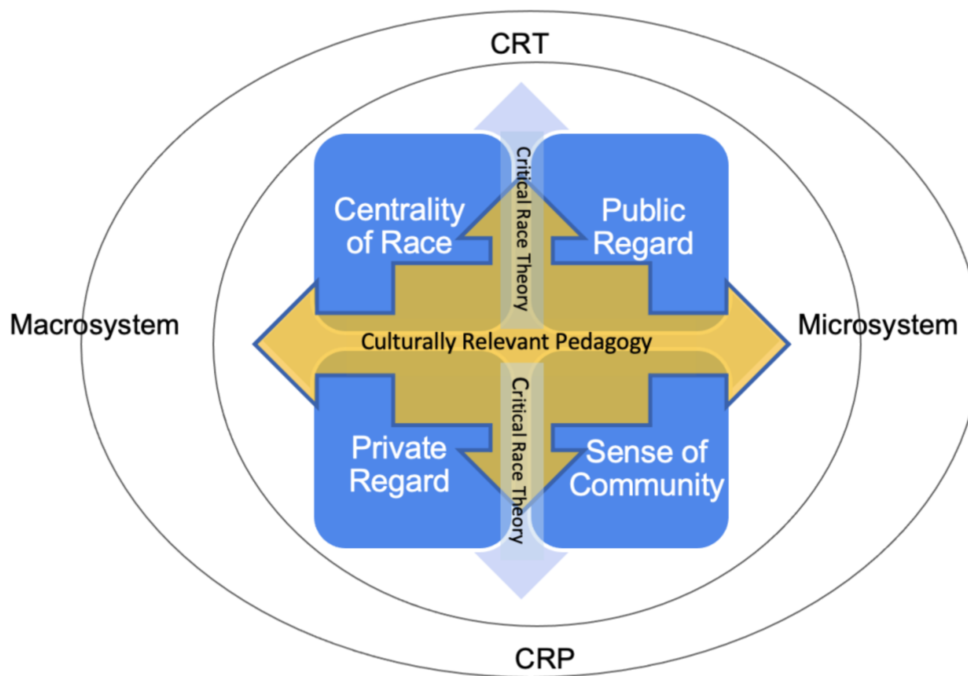

Figure 1. *Model for a Sense of Critical Belonging for African-American Students*

The model above demonstrates the macro- and microsystems that African-American student belonging is situated within and the theoretical frameworks that guide these systems. The macrosystem refers to the institutional, social, cultural, political, and/or historical context that impacts belonging. The microsystem refers to the interpersonal, individual, and collective experiences that impact belonging. Centrality of race, public regard, private regard, and sense of community refer to belonging indicators used to guide this study. Centrality emerged as the primary indicator of belonging and confirms research by Boston and Warren (2017) and Sellers et al. (1998) about the importance of racial centrality when cultivating belonging for African-American students. Public regard and private regard were useful in understanding student perceptions (of themselves and how they are perceived) surrounding race, identity, and belonging but were not as emergent as centrality when exploring the four research questions. A sense of community emerged as a significant indicator that identified how collectivist and

system-wide notions of supporting, caring for, and supporting African-American belonging had a positive impact on their academic experiences.

CRT and CRP refer to the theoretical frameworks and underpinnings used to facilitate belonging within macro- and microsystems. These theoretical underpinnings were also used to generate recommendations that situate African-American student experiences within a larger institutional, social, cultural, and political context. Situating belonging for marginalized communities is essential, as African-American students and families are frequently blamed for the marginalization and/or lack of belonging they may encounter from the larger social and/or structural context (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; DeNicolo et al., 2017; Finn, 1989). In this study, the equity-minded teachers and students actively understood, acknowledged and disrupted a larger historical and political context of white supremacy culture, exclusion, and structural inequity to support student success and belonging. Without criticality, the dominant racial narrative surrounding African-American students and belonging is that African-American students who lack of belonging need help, as opposed to schools needing help creating belonging for African-American students (Anderson et. al. 1974; Coleman et al. 1966, Elliott and Voss, 1974; Goodenow, 1993b; Hirschi, 1969; Katz, 1964).

Damage-centered narratives about African Americans can be absorbed from the larger social landscape by non-African Americans and African Americans alike. Furthermore, they do not aid in providing useful strategies that transform the system of schooling or the larger political context that reproduces inequity within education. A sense of critical belonging disrupts these harmful dominant narratives through a myriad of practices and provides nuance in how belonging is defined, experienced, received, and applied within and across historically marginalized communities. A sense of critical belonging for African-American students is

reflective, in that it provides a strengths-based approach to curriculum and instruction that examines the structural and interpersonal factors impacting belonging. However, it is actionable, in that it aims to provide practical strategies that support belonging for African-American students at both institutional and interpersonal levels.

Recommendations for Fostering a Sense of Critical Belonging for African-American Students

This research utilized concepts from CRT and CRP to explore the strengths and challenges of developing positive racial identity and belonging for African-American students. These concepts will be used to provide recommendations that address the four research questions guiding this study.

Recommendation #1: Employ Racial Realism

Racial realism is the acknowledgment of systemic racism (and its many intersecting social inequities) as a systematic set of policies, cultural norms, assumptions, and legally sanctioned institutionalized practices historically embedded in the American education system. Racial realism entails using that knowledge to disrupt and create proactive strategies in order to sustain equity in the classroom (Chapman & Bophal, 2019; Mills, 1998, p. 12). Racial realism sheds light on the first three research questions. The first two questions explore what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students, and the last question examines how race factors into belonging. Racial realism involves creating a learning environment that acknowledges and facilitates proactive strategies that disrupt various forms of structural inequity and positively impact belonging for African-American students. This practice also

helps shed light on the third and fourth research questions, which ask how equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belongingness for Africans and how their racial identities impact their teaching. Racial realism required African-American teachers to reflect on how school or larger institutional factors (such us course offerings, counter spaces, counter stories, or lack thereof) supported or negated the development of their own racially marginalized identities in schools. Teachers then used this experiential knowledge, criticality, and professional expertise to inform how to cultivate belonging for African-American students and students from marginalized backgrounds at large. Teachers' racial realism helped them proactively identify and disrupt institutional, political, or social barriers impacting their ability to support the critical racial identities and ultimately belonging of African-American students.

Boston and Warren (2017) are among the first researchers to reveal the centrality of race and racism as primary indicators of African-American student belonging. However, the concept of racial realism is still relatively new within the field of belonging. Among prior research that has identified criticality in belonging, few studies explore proactive strategies that situate belonging within a context of racial inequity, anti-Blackness, and institutional white supremacy (Booker, 2006). Teachers situated belonging within a larger socio-institutional-historical context and were thoughtful about developing proactive strategies that addressed the anti-Black and anti-African-American practices built into the institutional facets of schooling. Research results from this study corroborate existing scholarly evidence that demonstrates a positive correlation between African-American students' racial identity, critical consciousness, and academic achievement (Boston & Warren, 2017; Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Worrell, 2007). A framework of racial realism does more than identify the connection between critical understandings of racial identity development and student success. Racial realism situates

belonging for African-American students in a nuanced sociocultural-historical-political-institutional context, acknowledging systemic inequity as a common embedded practice within schooling, particularly for historically marginalized communities. As a result, racial realism pushes the field of belonging to develop proactive, thoughtful, long-term approaches at institutional and interpersonal levels to address the racial inequity that is embedded within schooling.

Racial realism, and/or intersectional racial realism, is foundational to critical belonging, in that its main function is to acknowledge, identify, and proactively disrupt structural inequity when cultivating belonging. In the context of this study, racial realism addresses gaps in dominant belonging frameworks through the identification, acknowledgment, and disruption of institutional and systemic inequities, such as intersectional anti-Blackness, when understanding how to cultivate belonging for African-American students (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; DeNicolo et al, 2017). The application of racial realism was demonstrated through the support, recruitment, and retention of the equity-minded African-American teachers. Although African-American teacher belonging was not the focus of this study, it is important to note that African-American teacher belonging was interconnected with African-American student belonging. This relationship between student and teacher belonging for African-American students builds on current belonging research, which identifies the importance of strong student–teacher relationships to support student belonging for African-American students (Irvin et al., 2011; Neal-Jackson, 2018). Having a critical mass and community of equity-minded African-American teachers, students, and administrators within a larger social justice school climate had a positive system-wide impact on the belonging and retention of equity-minded African-American students and teachers alike.

Recommendation #2: Challenge Dominant Ideology

Challenging dominant ideologies are core to cultivating a critical sense of belonging. Dominant ideology is defined in this study as a set of problematic beliefs, values, misinformation, and attitudes that are widely accepted by the larger society that result in the subordination (at the interpersonal and/or institutional levels) of African Americans (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Harris, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Challenging dominant ideology sheds light on the first three research questions, which explore what belonging looks like for African-American students, how race factors into belonging, and how equity-minded African-American teachers cultivate belonging for African-American students. When understanding what belonging looks like for African-American students, it means continually resisting and disrupting anti-Black ideology, or anti-Blackness, at the classroom, school, and district levels. In the context of this study, anti-Blackness manifested itself through the social context, within the school curriculum, within access and retention of resources and community cultural capital, and within cultural norms such as the language used to describe African Americans. Challenging dominant ideology and its many nuanced intersections, for example, sexism, homophobia, and/or ableism, had a positive impact on creating a welcoming environment for African Americans.

Challenging dominant anti-Black ideology confirms prior research that found that when teachers and administrators identify and disrupt anti-Blackness within the many facets of schooling, academic success and belonging are supported (Boston & Warren, 2017; Hundley, 1965; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Strengths-based practices specifically challenge anti-African-American and/or anti-Black ideology within schooling; this includes myths and narratives that subordinate and/or center only deficits when speaking of African-American students (and/or

Black students at large). Strengths-based practices and ideologies are necessary to challenge anti-Black ideologies that often infect the mindsets of students of color, and non-African Americans in how they perceive, treat, and/or support African-American students (this can include policymakers, teachers, school leadership, and students). A critical framework of belonging for African-American students challenges and disrupts institutional and interpersonal anti-Blackness; it acknowledges and honors a history of transformative resistance by the African-American community, and it is unique to the complex needs and experiences of African-American students. Moreover, a sense of critical belonging for African-American students draws on culturally nuanced experiential knowledge and scholarship from equity-focused African-American scholars and community members alike and is core to gaining racial and social justice for African-American students in education.

Recommendation #3: Foster Counter Spaces and Stories

Counter spaces play a primary role in fostering a sense of critical belonging for African-American students. Counter spaces are defined as spaces where racial deficits and/or oppressive structures are disrupted and where a positive racial climate, or in the context of this study, a pro-intersectional African-American climate can be established (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solorzano et. al, 2000). Counter spaces are wide-ranging and can exist as curricular content or as a physical space outside of the classroom. In this study, space, or its construction, is demonstrated as a physical, institutional, and curricular construct. Counter storytelling or counter-stories are tools used in qualitative research to expose, analyze, disrupt, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial power and privilege (DeCuir-Gunby & Walker-DeVose, 2013).

Counter spaces and stories shed light on all four research questions. When

understanding what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students and how race factors into African-American students' belonging, counter spaces are key to fostering a sense of critical belonging as they help students buffer, prepare, and navigate various systemic forms of inequity. When examining the research question of how African-American teachers foster belonging and how their racial identity factors into their teaching and pedagogical choices, African-American teachers' critical racial identities and personal experiences helped guide, foster, and create a space to support equity for African-American students.

The employment of counter stories and spaces as a tool to foster belonging for historically marginalized communities is an emergent tool within the field of belonging. Employing counter spaces and stories builds on belonging research, in that a large body of it is race-evasive, monocultural, and does not center social inequity (Booker, 2006). Employing counter stories and spaces acknowledges that African Americans (and historically marginalized communities) have been systemically subordinated within schooling (across a variety of mechanisms), have cultural nuances in learning, and thus, require space that affirms, develops, and supports the complex identities of African-American students.

Counter spaces and stories build upon prior belonging research that questions assumptions about whom or what historically marginalized communities need to belong to experience success (Abu-el Haj, 2011; Becket, 2022; DeNicolo et al, 2017; Kuttner, 2023). Counter spaces rooted and led by African-American experiential knowledge that acknowledges and actively buffers against various forms of systemic racism and inequity within schooling were spaces where African-American students experienced belonging. Counter spaces and stories extend the existing body of belonging research by challenging preconceived notions concerning the prerequisites of success within historically marginalized communities, as

highlighted by scholars such as Abu El-Haj and Bonet (2011), DeNicolo et al. (2017), and Kuttner (2023). Counter spaces designed by and for African Americans in this study were deeply rooted in African-American experiential wisdom and deliberately aimed to acknowledge and counteract systemic inequity and racism prevalent within the educational system. Counter spaces and stories provide a model for belonging researchers in what hope and dignity can look like for African Americans navigating a system rooted in intersectional white supremacy ideology.

Recommendation #4: Employ an Intersectional Lens

Intersectionality helped shed light on all four research questions. When understanding what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students, intersectionality ensures that all African-American students, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities such as African-American women and women of color, are equitably and intentionally supported. Intersectionality acknowledges that multiple layers of subordination interlock with race and uniquely impact African-American women, Black women, and women of color (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2015). When understanding how race factors into African-American students' belonging, intersectionality calls for a complicated and/or multidimensional approach when attempting to understand how race factors into belonging. Intersectionality recognizes shared, differing, and conflicting experiences surrounding race and identity. It acknowledges that each African-American student will have a unique set of needs, depending on their intersections, that need to be recognized and supported to cultivate belonging. When examining the research question of how African-American teachers foster belonging and how African-American teachers' racial identity factors into their teaching and pedagogical choices,

the intersectional experiences of teachers brought awareness to the reproduction of various forms of inequity (for example, sexism with racial equity spaces or racism within gender equity spaces) and the need for intersectional approaches to education.

Intersectionality aligns with prior belonging research, in that it acknowledges the impact of student identity on African-American belonging (Sellars et al., 1998; Boston & Warren, 2017). Intersectionality complicates these findings by contributing a nuanced examination of the intricate interplay between various intersecting identities, the socio-historical context these identities are situated within, and how experiences of belonging can differ across these identities, both institutionally and interpersonally. Intersectionality also provides specificity in how to support belonging across multiple subordinate identities for each individual student. Intersectionality calls for nuanced and multifaceted strategies that acknowledge the many dimensions of identity needed to understand the complexity of belonging for African-American students.

Intersectionality also pushes the field of belonging to value the critical intersectional experiential knowledge that African-American educators can bring to an educational setting. The presence of a diverse mass of equity-minded African-American teachers offers invaluable insights into navigating the intricacies and multifaceted aspects inherent in the diversity and complexity of African-American students. Emergent belonging research documents the positive impact of experiential knowledge in supporting student belonging for Black boys (Harmon et al., 2022). This research not only confirms these outcomes but also extends the scope of their findings to encompass all African-American students included in the present study. Intersectionality veers and builds on prior research by adding a multidimensional understanding

of what belonging can look like, how it can differ across education settings, and how it is uniquely experienced across varying intersections within the African-American community.

Recommendation #5: Disrupt Curriculum as a Property of Whiteness

The disruption of the property of whiteness holds connections to research questions that outline practices that identify what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students, how race factors into belonging, and what practices equity-minded African-American teachers employ to support belonging. Equity-minded African-American teachers who proactively disrupted, opened, and repositioned rights, benefits, and privileges traditionally aligned with whiteness (for example, creating access to AP courses and resistance against deficit and representation of African Americans in curriculum) had a positive impact on belonging for African-American students.

Harris (1993a) provided four "rights" or means by which whiteness as property propagates white privilege. The four rights ascribed to the property of whiteness include the right to exclude, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to disposition, and the right to reputation and status. The disruption of one or multiple rights supported positive racial centrality and a sense of community (i.e., belonging), not only for African-American students but also for all students in the study.

Disruption of the property of whiteness veers from prior belonging research and emergent research addressing the lack of criticality within belonging, by not only naming white supremacy but also providing direct strategies for how to disrupt its institutional manifestations embedded within U.S. schooling (Beckett, 2022; Kuttner, 2023). When referring to the literature on belonging, disrupting the right to exclude veers from prior mainstream race-neutral

assumptions about belonging and school culture (Baumeister & Leary, 1005; Goodenow, 1993a). The right to exclude normalizes the process of historical erasure and denies marginalized communities' access to institutions, generational wealth, and positive historical knowledge of themselves and their communities. This builds on prior research demonstrating how race, and particularly white privilege, displaces belonging and care for African-American students. These classroom materials and dominant institutional norms disregard the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities, valorize problematic white Americans, and ignore government actions and social movements that have suppressed social and economic prosperity in racially marginalized communities (Brown & Brown, 2020; King, 1994; King, 2006).

The right to disposition refers to the inheritance or transfer of cultural norms, privileges, values, and behaviors that align with white supremacy culture and/or white middle-class norms (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). Various cultural aspects of white supremacy culture (such as individualism, race evasiveness/colorblindness, perfectionism, Eurocentric, and anti-Black curriculum) are transmitted to African-American students through curriculum and schooling and can result in experiences of external and internalized anti-Black racism, which ultimately marginalizes the belonging of African-American students (Bell, 2019; Brown & Brown, 2020; Okun & Jones, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). Affirming critical understandings of African-American heritage and identity (for example, collectivist orientations surrounding racial solidarity) disrupts the right to dispose of white supremacy culture, which veers from dominant monocultural understandings of belonging (Goodenow, 1993).

African-American teachers' disruption of, or repositioning of, the right to reputation and status and the right to use and enjoyment also veered from dominant monocultural understandings of belonging (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b). The right to reputation

and status designates the criteria for who or what inherits the benefits, reputation, and status associated with learning and aligning with the dominant cultural norms of whiteness (Harris, 1993a). According to Harris (1993a), the right to use and enjoyment refers to enjoyment when using whiteness as a resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional levels; thus, a white person "used and enjoyed" whiteness whenever they took advantage of the privileges accorded to white people (p. 1734). Repositioning the right to reputation and status and the right to use and enjoyment to support African-American students as experts in their cultural heritage, agents of change for marginalized communities, and future leaders (reputation and status) had a positive impact on academic engagement and how they conceptualized their futures (centrality). This practice deviates from the race-evasive and apolitical assumptions often present within dominant belonging research and provides a comprehensive understanding of how race shapes belonging for African-American students and teachers alike.

Recommendation #6: Create and/or Disrupt Institutional Mechanisms and Barriers

Institutional support and barriers refer to system-wide non-interpersonal factors that impact belonging for African-American students. This can include laws, policies, system-wide practices, demographics, dominant cultural norms, and historical, social, and political context that impact African Americans experiences of belonging. Creating and disrupting institutional mechanisms and barriers centering on race and identity had connections to research questions about what a sense of belonging looks like for African-American students and how race factors into student belonging. Examples such as the recruitment and retention of equity-minded African-American teachers and fostering system-wide critical understandings of race and identity and their positive impact on student belonging and an overall sense of community

demonstrate what belonging looks like for African-American students and how race factors into belonging.

Creating and/or disrupting institutional mechanisms and barriers both veers and builds upon prior belonging research. A large body of belonging research centers interpersonal interactions and/or biases in fostering student belonging (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011). Fostering belonging for African-American students is far more complex than student wellbeing and feelings of acceptance. The process is deeply political and requires the disruption of systemic barriers and creating of institutional mechanism that support African-American students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the need to use criticality when applying belonging frameworks to African-American students and marginalized communities at large. Terms such as racial centrality and sense of community were helpful in identifying positive African-American relationships with schooling but were limited in their lack of criticality or understanding of how structure, formation, setting, social context, or other institutional features, which may impact experiences of racial identity within a community. The methodology of this study paired critical theoretical frameworks with these concepts and theories (i.e., RIT and belonging) to identify the intuitional, structural, and contextual factors that impact African-American students experiences of belonging. The findings propose that the use of criticality (i.e., racial realism, intersectionality, challenging dominant ideology, disruption of whiteness as property, experiential knowledge, etc.) is crucial when developing positive racial centrality, public regard, private regard, and a sense of community for African-American students. Critical belonging fosters African-American counter spaces both inside and outside of school, centers

critical experiential knowledge of African-American teachers and communities of color, and calls the field of belonging into question as to what and whom African-American students need to belong to be fully human. Lack of criticality and inclusion of strengths-based approaches, when referring to African-American belonging (and marginalized communities), can reify white supremacy and problematic notions of deficiency, victim-blaming, self-hatred, assimilation, and lack of agency for African-American students. The importance of criticality was best explained by Dubois (1935) almost a century ago:

> "As it is today, American Negroes [and the larger society] almost universally disparage their own schools. They look down upon them; they often treat the Negro teachers in them with contempt; they refuse to work for their adequate support; and they refuse to join public movements to increase their efficiency. One of the primary reasons being an utter lack of faith on the part of Negroes that their race can do anything really well. I have repeatedly seen wise and loving colored parents take infinite pains to force their little children into schools where the white children, white teachers, and white parents despised and resented the dark child, made mock of it, neglected or bullied it, and literally rendered its life a living hell. Such parents want their child to "fight" this thing out, but, dear God, at what cost?! Rather than using a little child as a battering ram upon which its nastiness can be thrust, we must give greater value and greater emphasis to the rights of the child's own soul. We shall get a finer, better balance of spirit; an infinitely more capable and rounded personality by putting children in schools where they are wanted, and where they are happy and inspired, than in thrusting them into hells where they are ridiculed and hated. Schools where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race who know what it means to be [B]lack in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better."

The relevance of this nearly century-old quote demonstrates both the significance and timelessness of racial justice in education, particularly for African-American students. The mechanisms that are demonstrated in this study to support belonging and positive self-concept continue to be banned in local and statewide policy, providing a clear demonstration of whose belonging continues to remain forbidden at the institutional level (Lambert, 2023; Sawchuck, 2021). This eminent scholar and his quote remain relevant when discussing African-American

schooling experiences and the need for critical and nuanced understandings of race and identity to foster positive identity development and academic success for African-American students.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Protocol

Introductory questions:

1. How is everyone doing? I have some basic questions about your experience as an African-American student in class. No pressure, feel free to answer when you can. This will be used to help improve your student experience.

Centrality (an individual's perception of self with respect to race across various situations)

1. How do you feel about this class?
2. Do you feel academically and emotionally supported?
    a. What about this class do you enjoy? What do you look forward to about this class?
    b. Is there anything about this class you don't enjoy? Is there anything about this class that you dread doing or really dislike?
3. How do you get along with (feel about) the other students in this class?
    a. Do you feel comfortable sharing personal experiences or information about your life or family during class discussions?
4. How do you think African-American students are treated in this school?
    a. Can you think of a time when you felt your race was a problem or issue at your school?

Personal regard (regard one has for their own identity, culture, or race)

1. How much or how little do your family and friends talk about race and racism? What do these conversations look like? Can you give an example?
2. How much or how little information do you think you know about African-American history?
    a. Who teaches it to you?
    b. When or how do you think you are supposed to learn it?
    c. Do you think it is the school's responsibility to teach about African-American history?
    d. Is there anyone or anything specific that helps you have a positive self-concept or feel proud of being African American?

Public regard (regard that out-group members have about one's race)

1. Do you feel your classmates react when the teacher or students bring up issues of race and gender? Why or why not?
    a. Can you think of an example in class? How did it make you feel about the teacher?
        i. How do you feel about these discussions? (Do discussions about race make you feel a certain way, like awkward or angry or even proud?)
2. How do you feel when your teacher includes lessons or teachings about

African-American people?

3. How would you say that people in your class react to discussions about African-American people? Why or why not?
    a. Can you give an example?
    b. Did it make you feel like you wanted to be involved in the class?
4. How would each of you describe your relationship with Mr. X or Mrs. X?
    a. What makes you think that way about Mr. X or Mrs. X?
    b. Would you recommend Mr. X or Mrs. X as a teacher for other African-American students? Why or why not?
    c. What makes you think that way about Mr. X or Mrs. X?
    d. Would you recommend Mr. X or Mrs. X as a teacher for other African-American students? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Pre-Teacher Interview Protocol

Introduction Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your background.

Centrality (an individual's perception of self with respect to race across various situations)

1. Reflecting on your own experiences, what do you think African-American students need in order for them to experience belongingness?
    a. How does your life experiences shape the way you foster belongingness in African-American students? Does this experiential knowledge add to your teaching pedagogy?
    b. What differences are present in how belonging is supported between males and females?
        i. How has your experience as an African-American woman/man helped to inform this pedagogy?
2. Do you feel discussions about equity helps shape African-American students' sense of self? Can you name an example?
    a. Why or why not do you think this is important?
    b. How do you feel this impacts their sense of belonging in the class? How does this shape the community of the classroom?
    c. Do think it impacts their ability to perform in the classroom?

Private regard (how African-American students perceive their own racial identity)

1. Do you feel that students being able to see themselves in the curriculum impacts their belonging?
    a. What about their overall engagement or performance?
2. Do you purposely relate classroom content to students' cultural experiences?
    a. Why is this important for African-American students?
    b. What are the differences in content along gender lines?
    c. Can you name an example?

Public regard (how non-African-American students perceive African-American students)

1. Are there empowering narratives about African-American people included within your teaching?
    a. How do you feel this helps to shape belonging for African-American students?
    b. What is the impact of this on non-African-American students' perceptions of African-American people in general? Why or why not is this important? How do you think this helps or hinders the foster belonging and community?
2. Are there aspects of your class that talk about misconceptions about African-American people?
3. Are there any particular tools, such as books, media, or teaching strategies, that are useful in developing positive students' dispositions about African-American people?
    a. Why is this important?

General belonging (factors outside or in connection with race that support belonging)

1. How do you try to cultivate community for your class in general?
    a. What role does trust play in how peers interact to form a community? What role does trust between you and the students as a classroom community is formed?
        i. What about for African-American students?
2. Do you try to include students' experiences and perspectives into the classroom?
    a. Do you feel this helps to engage students in the course? Can you give an example?

3. Do you feel academic rigor is important within your subject?
    a. How do African-American students generally perform in your class academically?
    b. How do you feel that impacts their connection with you, and the classroom community at large?
    c. How do you feel this rigor impacts their ability to belong in future academic spaces?

Appendix C: Post Teacher Interview Protocol

Centrality

1. I have a few examples I documented during observations that seemed to help foster belonging for your students that I'd like for us to talk about. [State examples.]
    a. Did your actions and thinking differ along gender lines?
    b. How did this example impact their academic engagement, performance, and attendance?
    c. What personal or professional experiences helped to inform your thinking behind this?
2. In the first and second example, you discussed race in the classroom.
    a. What was the intent of these discussions?
    b. How did you feel this fostered community within the class?
3. Do you feel any of these examples about power and racial inequity may have helped shape the self-concept of the African-American students in the classroom?

Public regard (how non-African-American students perceive African-American students)

1. In this example [state example], you had a discussion about race and inequity? How do you feel this helped shape perceptions about African-American folks?
    a. What about the perception of non-African-American students toward African-American folks? Why or why not is this significant? How do you think this fostered or negated general community?
    b. Do you feel, if at all, this helped to foster belonging for African-American students? Why or why not?
2. You talked about misconceptions and stereotypes [state example].
    a. How did you feel this shaped cross-racial relationships with African-American students?
        i. How did this shape the overall group's level of engagement with the course content? Did you feel African-American students seem engaged?
        ii. How do you feel this supported the way non-African-American students treat or interact with African-American students?
3. Do you feel that staff in the school develop supportive relationships with African-American students?
    a. How do you feel this impacts their academic success?

Private regard (how African-American students perceive their own racial identity)

1. In the pre-interview, you talked about prior cultural experiences and how they help to inform your teaching of African-American students. [State example from pre-interview] How do you feel this awareness, or lack thereof, helped you support African-American students' identity over the quarter?

2. You discussed historical narratives involving African-American people. Did you feel talking about [state example] impacted their belonging? Why or why not?
    a. Do you feel students were empowered and academically engaged? Why?
    b. Did you intentionally relate the classroom content to students' cultural

experiences?

c. How do you feel school policy has shaped how or what you could teach?
    i. How does it shape the way students view their own racial identity?

Appendix D: Observation Protocol

Culturally Responsive Instruction Observation Protocol
Fourth Revised Edition (January 2017)

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School (use assigned number):____________________________ Teacher (assigned number): ____
____
Observer:_________________________ Date of Observation: ___________ # of Students in Classroom: __________
Academic Subject: ___________________________________ Grade Level(s):
____
Start Time of Observation: ____________ End Time of Observation:________ Total Time of Obs: ___
____

DIRECTIONS

After the classroom observation, review the field notes for evidence of each "pillar" of Culturally Responsive Instruction. If an example of the following descriptors was observed, record notes in the field notes column. If a "non-example" of the descriptors was observed, make a note in the field notes column on which that non-example is found. Then, make an overall/holistic judgment of the implementation of each component. To what extent and/or effect was the component present?

I. CLASS CLASSROOM RELATIONSHIPS

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time
1. The teacher demonstrates an ethic of care (e.g., equitable relationships, bonding)	Generally Effective Practices: • Teacher refers to students by name, uses personalized language with students • Teacher conveys interest in students' lives and experiences Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • There is a "family-like" environment in the classroom; there is a sense of belonging; students express care for one another in a variety of ways • Teacher promotes an environment that is safe and anxiety-free for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students; students seem comfortable participating in the classroom • Teacher differentiates patterns of interaction and management techniques to be culturally		

	congruent with the students and families s/he serves (e.g., using a more direct interactive style with students who require it)		
2. The teacher communicates high expectations for all students	Generally Effective Practices: • There is an emphasis on learning and higher-level thinking; challenging work is the norm • Students do not hesitate to ask questions that further their learning; there is a "culture of learning" in the classroom • Teacher expects every student to participate actively; students are not allowed to be unengaged or off-task • Teacher gives feedback on established high standards and provides students with specific information on how they can meet those standards Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • There are group goals for success as well as individual goals (e.g., goals and charts posted on walls); every student is expected to achieve • Students are invested in their own and others' learning ; they continuously assist one another • Teacher takes steps to assure that emerging bilinguals understand directions and have access to the same content and learning as native speakers		
3. The teacher creates a learning atmosphere that engenders respect for one another and toward diverse populations	Generally Effective Practices: • Teacher sets a tone for respectful classroom interaction and teaches respectful ways for having dialogue and being in community with one another • Teacher implements practices that teach collaboration and respect, e.g., class meetings, modeling and reinforcing effective interaction, etc. • Students interact in respectful ways and know how to work together effectively • Teacher and students work to understand each other's perspectives Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Positive and affirming messages and images about students' racial and ethnic identities are present throughout the classroom • Teacher affirms students' language and cultural knowledge by integrating it into classroom conversations • Teacher encourages students to share their stories with one another and to have pride in their history and linguistic and cultural identities		

	• Classroom library and other available materials contain multicultural content that reflect the perspectives of and show appreciation for diverse groups • Classroom library (including online resources) includes bilingual texts that incorporate students' native languages		
4. Students work together productively	Generally Effective Practices: • Students are continuously viewed as resources for one another and assist one another in learning new concepts • Students are encouraged to have discussions with peers and to work collaboratively		

II. FAM FAMILY COLLABORATION

NOTE: When scoring this component of the CRIOP, the family collaboration interview should be used in addition to field observations.
Observations alone will not provide adequate information for scoring.

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time
The teacher establishes genuine partnerships (equitable relationships) with parents/ caregivers	Generally Effective Practices: • Parents'/caregivers' ideas are solicited on how best to instruct the child; parents are viewed as partners in educating their child • There is evidence of conversations with parents/caregivers where it's clear that they are viewed as partners in educating the student Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher makes an effort to understand families and respects their cultural knowledge by making a concerted effort to develop relationships in order to learn about their lives, language, histories, and cultural traditions • Teacher makes an effort to communicate with families in their home languages (e.g.,learning key terms in the student's home language,		

	translating letters, using translation tools involving a family liaison, etc.)		
1. The teacher reaches out to meet parents in positive, non-traditional ways	Generally Effective Practices: • Teacher conducts home visit conferences • Teacher makes "good day" phone calls and establishes regular communication with parents Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher plans parent/family activities at locations within the home community • Teacher meets parents in parking lot or other locations that may be more comfortable for them		
2. The teacher encourages parent/family involvement	Generally Effective Practices: • Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in school-related events and activities • Parents/caregivers are invited into the classroom to participate and share experiences Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Parents from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are invited to share their unique experiences and knowledge (e.g., sharing their stories, reading books in their native language, teaching songs and rhymes in their native language, etc.)		
3. The teacher intentionally learns about families' linguistic/cultural knowledge and expertise to support student learning	Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher identifies families' "funds of knowledge" so it can be used to facilitate student learning (e.g., through home visits; social events for families where information is solicited; conversations with parents and students about their language, culture, and history; attending community events; home literacy projects; camera projects etc.)		

III. ASMT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time

1. Formative assessment practices are used that provide information throughout the lesson on individual student understanding	Generally Effective Practices: • Teacher frequently assesses students' understanding throughout instruction and uses assessment data throughout the lesson to adjust instruction • Students are able to voice their learning throughout the lesson • Informal assessment strategies are used continuously during instruction, while students are actively engaged in learning, and provide information on the learning of every student (e.g. "talking partners," whiteboards, journal responses to check continuously for understanding) • Teacher modifies instruction or reteaches when it's clear that students are not meeting learning targets		
2. Students are able to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways	Generally Effective Practices • Divergent responses and reasoning are encouraged; students are able to share the processes and evidence they used to arrive at responses versus simply providing "the" correct answer Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Students with limited English proficiency and/or limited literacy can show their conceptual learning through visual or other forms of representation (e.g., drawing, labelling, completing graphic organizers etc. depending upon their level of English language acquisition)		
3. Authentic assessments are used frequently to determine students' competence in both language and content.	Practices: • Students' written and oral language proficiency is assessed while they are engaged in purposeful activity • Teacher primarily uses authentic, task-embedded assessments (e.g., anecdotal notes, targeted observation, rubrics/analysis of students' written products, math charts/journals, etc.) Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher assesses both academic language and content		
4. Students have opportunities for self-assessment	Generally Effective Practices: • Students are encouraged to evaluate their own work based upon a determined set of criteria • Students are involved in setting their own goals for learning • Students are involved in developing the criteria for their finished products (e.g., scoring rubrics)		

IV. INSTR INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time

1. Instruction is contextualized in students' lives, experiences, and individual abilities	Generally Effective Practices: • Learning activities are meaningful to students and promote a high level of student engagement • Materials and real-world examples are used that help students make connections to their lives • Learning experiences build on prior student learning and invite students to make connections Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher uses instructional methods/activities that provide windows into students' worlds outside of school (e.g., "All About Me" books, student-created alphabet walls, camera projects, etc.) • Teacher views students' life experiences as assets and builds on students' cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and "cultural data sets," making connections during instruction in the various content areas • Materials and examples are used that reflect diverse experiences and views • Families' "funds of knowledge" are integrated in learning experiences when possible; parents are invited into the classroom to share their knowledge		
2. The teacher focuses on developing students' academic language	Generally Effective Practices: • There is an emphasis on learning academic vocabulary in the particular content area • Students are taught independent strategies for learning new vocabulary • Key academic vocabulary and language structures are identified prior to a study or investigation Culturally Responsive: • Teacher develops language objectives in addition to content objectives, having specific goals in mind for students' linguistic performance • Teacher articulates expectations for language use (e.g "I want you to use these vocabulary words in your discussion; I expect you to reply in a complete sentence" etc.) • Teacher scaffolds students' language development as needed (sentence frames, sentence starters, etc.) • Academic language is taught explicitly (identifying it in written passages, dissecting complex sentences, using mentor texts, creating "learning/language walls," etc.)		
3. The teacher uses instructional techniques that scaffold student learning	• Teacher uses a variety of teaching strategies to assist students in learning content (e.g., demonstrations, visuals, graphic organizers, reducing linguistic density, etc.) • Teacher models, explains and demonstrates skills and concepts and provides appropriate scaffolding • Teacher uses "comprehensible input" (e.g., gestures, familiar words and phrases, slower speech, etc.) to facilitate understanding when needed • Teacher builds on students' knowledge of their home languages to teach English (e.g., cognates, letter-sound relationships, syntactic patterns)		

4. Students have choices based upon their experiences, interests and strengths	• Students have multiple opportunities to choose texts, writing topics, and modes of expression based on preferences and personal relevance • Students have some choice in assignments • Students have some choice and ownership in what they are learning		

V. DIS DISCOURSE

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time
1. The teacher promotes active student engagement through discourse practices	• Teacher employs a variety of discourse protocols to promote student participation and engagement (e.g., call and response, talking circles, read-around, musical shares, etc.) • All students have the opportunity to participate in classroom discourse • Teacher uses various strategies throughout the lesson to promote student engagement through talk (e.g., partner share, small group conversation, interactive journals, etc.)		
2. The teacher promotes equitable and culturally sustaining discourse practices	Generally Effective Practices: • Students use collaborative, overlapping conversation and participate actively, supporting the speaker during the creation of story talk or discussion and commenting upon the ideas of others • Teacher uses techniques to support equitable participation, such as wait time, feedback, turn-taking, and scaffolding of ideas Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Students speak in their home language/dialect when it is situationally appropriate to do so • There is an emphasis on developing proficiency in students' native language as well as in Standard English; bilingualism/ multilingualism is encouraged (e.g., students learn vocabulary in their native languages; students read/write in their native languages; students learn songs and rhymes in other languages, etc.)		
3. The teacher provides structures that promote academic conversation	Generally Effective Practices: • Students engage in genuine discussions and have extended conversations • Teacher explicitly teaches and evaluates skills required for conducting effective academic conversations Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher provides prompts that elicit extended conversations and dialogue (e.g. questions on current issues; questions that would elicit differing points of view)	• Students are discouraged from talking together, or conversations are limited to short responses • Teacher rarely asks questions or provides prompts that would elicit extended dialogue	

		• Teacher does not teach skills required for academic conversations	
4. The teacher provides opportunities for students to develop linguistic competence	Practices: • Teacher provides many opportunities for students to use academic language in meaningful contexts • Students are engaged in frequent and authentic uses of language and content (drama, role play, discussion, purposeful writing and communication using ideas/concepts/vocabulary and syntactic structures from the field of study) Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Students are taught appropriate registers of language use for a variety of social contexts and are given opportunities to practice those registers in authentic ways	• Students' use of language is limited and they do not use language in authentic ways • Students are not taught about the registers of language use; they are expected to use Standard English in all social contexts	

VI. CRITICAL CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

CRI Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom:	Field notes: Examples of practice	Time
1. The curriculum and planned learning experiences provide opportunities for the inclusion of issues important to the classroom, school and community	Generally Effective Practices: • Students are engaged in experiences that develop awareness and provide opportunities to contribute, inform, persuade and have a voice in the classroom, school and beyond • Community-based issues and projects are included in the planned program and new skills and concepts are linked to real-world problems and events Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Students explore important contemporary issues (poverty, racism, global warming, human trafficking, animal cruelty, etc.) • Teacher encourages students to investigate real-world issues related to a topic being studied and to become actively involved in solving problems at the local, state, national, and global levels		
2. The curriculum and planned learning experiences incorporate opportunities to confront negative stereotypes and biases	Practices that are Culturally Responsive: • Teacher facilitates students' understanding of stereotypes and biases • Teacher encourages students to examine biases in popular culture that students encounter in their daily lives (TV shows, advertising, popular songs, etc.) • Teacher makes intentional use of multicultural literature to facilitate conversations about human differences		

	• As appropriate to the grade level being taught, teacher helps students to think about biases in texts (e.g., "Who has the power in this book? Whose perspectives are represented, and whose are missing? Who benefits from the beliefs and practices represented in this text?" etc.) • As appropriate to the grade level being taught, teacher challenges students to deconstruct their own cultural assumptions and biases both in the formal and informal curriculum		
3. The curriculum and planned learning experiences integrate and provide opportunities for the expression of diverse perspectives	Generally Effective Practices: ○ Students are encouraged to challenge the ideas in a text and to think at high levels Practices that are Culturally Responsive: ○ Texts include protagonists from diverse backgrounds and present ideas from multiple perspectives ○ Students are encouraged to explore alternative viewpoints ○ Opportunities are plentiful for students to present diverse perspectives through class discussions and other activities ○ Students are encouraged to respectfully disagree with one another and to provide evidence to support their views		